**Paper title:**

**South Asian British Muslim women’s later working lives in Greater Manchester: role of fragmented lives and other factors in shaping labour market attitudes and behaviour**

**Abstract:**

**Purpose**

This paper explores how gendered migration and transnational lives shape the life-long attitudes and behaviour of South Asian British Muslim women in the UK/Greater Manchester labour market. Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty first, second and third generation South Asian British Muslim women living in Greater Manchester, UK, the research situates these women’s lives at the intersections of institutional, organisational and socio-cultural terms and across borders to show how the intersections mobilise through shaping their attitudes and perceptions to subordinate, marginalise and dissuade them from work and social spaces.

**Methods**

Using the lens of translocational positionality (Anthias 2008, 2012) complemented by the life-course approach (Widmer and Ritschard, 2009; Ferrero and Shippe, 2009), the study conducted thirty semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with first, second and third generation South Asian British Muslim women living in Greater Manchester aged between 50 to 66 who worked in low skilled occupations or were unemployed/economically inactive, but, had been under pressure to find employment as a result of extended UK state pension age for women.

**Findings**

Findings show that the life-long intersections of the social categories of difference reinforced their status as ‘outsiders’ in the UK and their transnational lives, social positioning and ties to the countries of origin further shaped and confined their self-agency, attitudes and behaviour resulting in qualitative differences in social and structural experiences.

**Research implications**

In highlighting their understanding and interpretations of societal experiences, norms and expectations, the study contributes to the nuanced understanding of their attitudes and behaviour in the UK labour market. The study also contributes to ‘translocational positionality’ debates by expanding on the analytical use of social categories of difference to unpack and explain the simultaneity of the categories’ positioning within institutional, organisational, and socio-cultural dynamics.

**Originality/Value of the paper**

This investigation particularly contributes to explaining the high unemployment rates of the South Asian British Muslim older women in Greater Manchester through understanding their labour market attitudes and perceptions. Considering their highly diverse and intermittent career patterns, how these women rethink their work and career following the changes in UK state pension age play a crucial role in determining of how things will play out for the Greater Manchester labour market.

**Keywords**

Translocational positionality, Intersectionality, life-course, migration, gender, South-Asian women, South Asian British, Muslim women, older women.

**1. Introduction**

As women grow older, they increasingly face double/triple jeopardy in almost all spheres of their lives (Wilks and Neto, 2013; Itzen & Newman, 2003; Proctor, 2001). The ageist stereotype attitudes, coupled with gender discrimination, often create acute scenarios for older women within society and workplaces alike (Wilinska, 2010; Postuma and Campion, 2009). Further, when class, race, ethnicity and religion are added to the mix, women in the older age bracket become more vulnerable given their complex set of intersectional identities which evidently places them at the centre of discussion on precarity (Calasanti and King, 2015). These situations become even more delicate for migrant women than their native counterparts. Research shows that migrant women have one of the lowest employment rates in the UK, which is also a historical phenomenon i.e., their employment rate has been persistently low. Again, amongst all the minority women, the South Asian Muslim older group’s participation in the UK labour market is lower than most other groups. This older minority ethnic group’s employment rate is almost half of that of the native British White women and significantly lower when compared to the other minority women’s groups (BiTC, 2018).

Research in the area of work and organisation mostly focus on the stereotype attitudes and discrimination by employers and society towards this group (Clarke and Griffin, 2008; Dennis and Thomas, 2007; McCann and Giles, 2002); however, research on how these women themselves perceive the patterns of stereotypes, expectations, discrimination, inequalities and their positions in the labour market and into the wider society and what determines and shapes those perceptions and attitudes demand an equal attention in order to make sense of the bigger picture. On the other hand, research literature on migration history and study so far has been interested in and addressed the issues around racial and gender oppression of migrant men and women of ‘prime working age’ and/or ‘skilled migrant’ men and women (Donaldson et al., 2009; Batnitzky et al., 2008; Faggian and Sheppard, 2007). There is still a dearth of research on older migrant women’s life and work experiences in the existing literature who migrated to the UK on family or marriage visa.

This study targets these gaps in the literature and explores the perceptions, orientations, attitudes and behaviour of South Asian British Muslim older women living in the UK’s Greater Manchester area towards wage work. The study also examines what factors shape their attitudes and perceptions and attempts to determine the extent to which these perceptions are shaped by culture, society and religion (i.e. gendered migration and ideologies (Purkayastha, 2010)) and the extent to which these are the results of their UK labour market experiences. It also scrutinises how they perceive labour market opportunities and challenges and understand their positions in the UK labour market as South Asian British Muslim women. The study has also included a focus on some of the stereotypical discriminatory attitudes towards these women by the wider society, its culture and employers alike.

This group of women and their perceptions are of particular importance in such contexts, since a key aspect of these women’s needs for more flexible employment conditions has been consistently undermined, forcing many of them to accept poorer working conditions, lower rates of pay and lower status jobs, or, retire early altogether which to a large extent, are the results of persistent occupational segregation in the labour market and non-linear career paths throughout their life courses due to poor health conditions, extensive care responsibilities and other socio-cultural factors that constrain their opportunities and dissuade them from the labour market. Further, understanding their attitudes and perceptions has wider implications for the debates on equality in the contexts of ageing population and austerity.

The research questions this paper explores are -

1. How are the perceptions towards wage work and labour market behaviour and attitudes of South Asian British Muslim older women shaped by normative (i.e. social and cultural factors) factors?

2. How are these attitudes and perceptions shaped by the UK/local labour market factors?

3. How do these women perceive and understand their positions as South Asian British Muslim older women in the society and the labour market within Greater Manchester?

**2. Migration and settlement: history and struggles of fragmented lives**

In order to recognise this group’s diversity and difference and to write about their experiences and understanding from an informed social and economic perspective, it is important to provide an account of this group’s migration first and establish the cohort’s socio-economic history to be able to understand their historical relationship to the UK labour market. The timing and status (e.g., marriage or family migration) of their initial migration, the changing structure of the regional and local labour markets following the restructuring of the national and global economies at the time of their arrival and persistent segregation of labour market by gender, class, race and ethnic background are crucial consideration for this discussion.

Large-scale immigration of ethnic minority descent to Britain started after the Second World War (Anitha and Pearson, 2018; Brah, 1993). The South Asian Muslim men (mostly low skilled and low qualified Pakistani and Bangladeshi) migrated first without their female kin who would join them later on. These men found employment in the textile industries of Lancashire, Yorkshire, Manchester and Bradford, cars and engineering factories in the West Midlands, and Birmingham, and growing light industrial estates in places like Luton and Slough (Brah, 1993). When the building of Mangla dam in 1966 submerged large parts of the Mirpur district of Punjab, Pakistan, emigration from that area accelerated and more of them started arriving in Britain (ibid).

On the other hand, most Bangladeshi families in Britain in the present time are the result of large-scale migration in the early 1970s from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, as people (mostly young men) fled from the civil unrest /liberation war in their homeland (Peach, 2006). They first started settling in the East London boroughs. Their arrivals peaked in the period 1980-84. Like the Pakistanis, they were not adequately qualified for many jobs in Britain. These early settlers found employment in the garment industry in East London and the restaurants of the big London hotels, while others travelled to the Midlands and the north of England to work in textile factories. An important and interesting fact about their migration pattern was the dramatic re-gendering that was observed during the peak time of their migration - where the ratio of men to women that was estimated as being 40:1 since the beginning of the 1970s moved towards a ratio of 2:1 by the time of the 1981 census (Peach, 2006).

The women of both these Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim groups migrated to Britain later than the women from India (mostly Sikh and Hindu women). The relevance of this fact here is that South Asian (Indian and mostly Hindu) women arriving before the Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups were able to take up paid employment at a time of economic growth and relative stability. Mass production concentrated in factories, centralised forms of work organisation and managed national markets were key features of that phase when the early South Asian group had joined the labour market. Brah (1993) argued that one of the reasons why the non-muslim women from South Asia or the Indian women to be more specific, have been doing better than the Muslim groups (Pakistani and Bangladeshi) in the UK labour market was the timing of their initial joining. On the other hand, South Asian women arriving in Britain in the 70s and 80s (Pakistani and Bangladeshi group) encountered the labour market in a period of major economic restructuring and recession which had a particularly disproportionate impact on minority ethnic communities. Census data show that migration from Bangladesh to Britain reached its peak in the period 1980-1988, which was also the period when UK unemployment rate was at its highest (Jenkins, 2010; Fingleton et al., 2012). This has remained a crucial factor for these women and their life-long career trajectories, for, this situation reflected the central idea of life-long cumulative effects - ‘success breeds success’ or, ‘vicious circle’ of disadvantages (Ferrero and Shippe, 2009).

Besides, the region of their settlement and its local economy also shaped the relationship of these women to the labour market. The highest concentrations of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are found in London and South East region, with substantially large settlements also in Yorkshire, Humberside and in the North West region as also mentioned above. During the 1980s major job losses occurred in the West Midlands, especially in the manufacturing sector, where there had been a concentration of South Asian workers (Brah, 1993). The devastating impact of this change on South Asian households can be easily gauged, since, according to the 1971 census just over sixty percent of male workers of Pakistani and Indian origin in the West Midlands worked in the manufacturing industries. The women had also started concentrating in manufacturing, principally in the textiles and clothing industries, by that time. The decline in the sector led to a large scale of job loss (ibid). So, for these groups, the adversities of the situation provided with a double-hit. First, amongst the early settlers, men and women who were already doing jobs in the sector, lost their jobs, creating pressure on their financial conditions; second, for the groups arriving later - both men and women found it difficult to find enough of those jobs that suited their qualifications.

Under such circumstances, a secondary labour market that had also been growing simultaneously, had seen an increasing number of these South Asian workers joining those sectors (those who had lost their jobs as well as the new settlers). There was also an expansion of small businesses, too, especially, those that had the ‘working from home’ options (Peach et al., 1990). For the women of this group, at the time of limited or no availability of a decent job within sight coupled with financial pressures on family income due to the recession, an option of paid work that could be carried out from home appeared to be a realistic one (especially for women with young children to care for). Therefore, from such historical, economic and human capital perspective, it can be argued that difficulties to enter the formal job market, initial entry as low skilled or home workers and subsequent stagnation in such labour market positions may have contributed towards this cohort’s lifelong low participation and precarious conditions in the labour market. Further, job loss by the partner and by themselves during the time of economic recession, facing hardship and falling into poverty as a result, difficulty to re-enter the job market after a job loss or a break could also be added to the long list of factors that might have affected their situations.

**3. Methodology**

In order to explore how the interviewees’ transnational lives intersected with their intersectional identities of age, gender, class, race and religion to shape the perceptions, attitudes, behaviour and experiences, I adopted a translocational positionality lens (Anthias 2008, 2012) complemented by the life-course approach (Giele and Elder, 1998). This combined lens helped to emphasise ‘the shifting and contested nature of the different axes of power in specific social situations and the location of individuals and groupings along these axes’ (Yuval‐Davis, 2011) as well as to determining the role of life-long cumulative effects of advantages and disadvantages in shaping human behaviour and attitudes that eventually influence the quality of their lived experiences.

**3.1 Research context**

Greater Manchester provides an interesting context to explore the attitudes and experiences of older South Asian Muslim migrant women because of their significant underrepresentation in the labour market coupling with the tensions around the increase in the state pension age for women and the pressure to find employment. The lower level of national employment rate for this group is replicated at the local level in the North West region. Besides, within the North West, research already has listed Manchester as one of the race disparity challenge areas (BiTC, 2018). This creates further tension since almost twelve percent of GM’s population comprises of South Asian Muslim minority groups (ibid).

On the other hand, when it comes to ageing and older population, the city region takes pride in being the first age-friendly city in the UK to join the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities[[1]](#footnote-1) emphasising on establishing a culture and championing the idea of age-friendly workplaces[[2]](#footnote-2). The city also has an established specialised ageing hub for the area - the ‘Greater Manchester Ageing Hub’, which has strategic goals to face the challenges of the ageing population and workforce. Although how far the results of such strategic initiatives of encouraging, including and engaging the older population to be a part of the social change and dialogue are being effective and fruitful and are reaching the minority ethnic women’s group is debatable, since, there is still a lack of empirical understanding of its significantly underrepresented and underemployed section of the population i.e., the South Asian Muslim women in the older age bracket.

**3.2 Sampling and data collection**

Data reported in this paper were gathered through semi‐structured face‐to‐face interviews with thirty South Asian British Muslim women who were living in the UK and were either first, second or third-generation South Asian British Muslim women within the age bracket of 50 to 66. The age range was selected in consideration of the new state pension age for women (see the table below for some of the characteristics of the interviewees).

| **Table 1: Characteristics of interviewees** | |
| --- | --- |
| **Category** | **No. of interviewees** |
| **Migration generation:** | |
| First generation | 27 |
| Second generation | 2 |
| Third generation | 1 |
| **Employment status** | |
| Employed /self-employed | 6 |
| Unemployed/economically inactive with no previous experiences | 5 |
| Unemployed/economically inactive with previous experiences | 11 |
| Pensioner | 8 |
| **Education:** | |
| **Qualifications obtained in home country** | |
| Postgraduate level | 3 |
| Graduate level | 3 |
| High school level | 8 |
| Primary level | 12 |
| No formal education | 4 |
| **UK qualifications** | |
| A-level | 2 |
| NVQ level 2 | 2 |
| Other (vocational and professional training) | 18 |
| No UK qualifications | 8 |

The research was granted ethical approval by The University of Manchester’s Ethical Review Committee. Access to the interviewees was facilitated by a local South Asian women’s organisation; interviewees were contacted and invited to take part in the study over the phone and in person and the interviewees self‐selected themselves to take part. As previously stated, South Asian British Muslim older women are underrepresented in the Greater Manchester workforce, which presented challenges for accessing a larger number of interviewees who were employed. This, however, did not interfere with, rather helped to capture the nuances of their perceptions and attitudes towards such reluctance towards labour market participation.

Except for a few, all the interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ residences. The rest of the interviews were conducted at the premises of the women’s organisation. Interview schedule included questions on interviewees’ families, their social and work experiences as migrants to the UK as well as their lives before migration, reasons for migrating to the UK, their interactions within the UK societies (both within and outside their own communities), reasons for leaving the labour market, as well as questions about their previous and current career plans, career aspirations and motivation. Therefore, the interview schedule allowed to explore their lived experiences as migrant women working and living in Greater Manchester and the UK since the time of their migration as well as their lives back in their countries of origin. The data collected this way helped to understand how intersectional inequalities in different geographical locations and the aspect of temporality shaped the attitudes, behaviour and experiences of this particular group (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Interviews lasted on average for an hour and a half and were recorded and transcribed in full. To maintain interviewees’ anonymity, all names have been anonymised for the reporting purpose.

**3.3 Data analysis**

As previously stated, the focus on the categories of gender, race, religion, age and class is rooted in the relevance of the intersection of these categories to position these women in the work and social domains within the UK context since the time of their migration. In the analysis, I highlighted the relevance of the institutional, organisational and sociocultural contexts to understand how intersections operate as part of systems of differentiation that shape the experiences and positioning of this group across borders (see Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Dhamoon, 2011).

The data analysis was an iterative process, and I adopted Bilge’s (2009) two-step hybrid approach for the data analysis. I started the analysis by independently reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and formulating codes that I identified as emerging from interviewees’ accounts associated with their social categories of difference. The codes were identified from the interview responses by interviewees. For the second-level coding, I focused on grouping categories based on the research interest in situating the attitudes/perceptions/experiences of the women in institutional, organisational and sociocultural terms. Another element of this second-level coding was to address the extensiveness and potential unmanageability of first-level categories in the qualitative data; for this, I aimed at further data reduction to facilitate the interpretation within the translocational intersectional framework, looking for similarities and differences in different interviewees’ individual accounts to find patterns. The interpretation was further guided by Cole's (2009) three questions: (i) who is included in this category?; (ii) what role does inequality play?; and (iii) where are the similarities? These questions helped to focus on the interdependency of the categories, the nuances in the positioning of the categories as part of hierarchies of power relations, privileges and disadvantages, and the commonalities across the categories found in the experience of being dominant or subordinate for establishing the patterns (Rodriguez, 2018).

At the second-level coding, a life-course approach was also operationalised where the codes indicative of any life-long /effects were included. This process was guided by the axioms of the ‘Cumulative Inequalities’ model by Ferrero and Shippee (2009). In cases of discrepancies, codes were either reassigned or re‐coded. For the final step, I grouped the codes into theoretical categories to show how gender, age, class, race and religion as categories of differentiation were mobilised alongside time, space and location. I aggregated the codes based on how I identified them as articulating an integrated framework that shaped their attitudes and behaviour.

It is recognised that this approach is one way where there are others in which intersectional analyses could be crafted. Nevertheless, the intention remains that findings could be made sense of within the theoretical and analytical framework that locates the intersections of gender and other categories of difference within different institutional, organisational and sociocultural dynamics and structures, and that this helps to show how resulting dynamics shape the material and relational experiences through shaping the attitudes and perceptions of the interviewees.

**4. Findings and analysis: Understanding how factors shape labour market attitudes and behaviour through a transnational lens**

In the following sections, I discuss how gender and other social and structural categories of difference embedded within structures intersect to shape these migrant women's perceptions, attitudes, participation and behaviour in the UK labour market. The findings are organised in two sections: in the first section, it is shown how the intersections operated in institutional and social terms to disadvantage their social positioning pre-migration. The second section shows how the intersections carried over as a mechanism that regulated and subordinated these migrant women in the UK social and cultural/community settings to further impact the shaping of their labour market attitudes and behaviour post-migration.

This process involved exploring and understanding how they themselves understood and described their migrant lives and the social positioning in both past and present contexts and through different transitions/turning points of their lives. These particular aspects of their migration trajectories in the interview analysis further focused on illuminating the extent to which the interviewees regarded their work attitudes and employment commitment to be driven by their changing needs to contribute to the household income or balancing care responsibilities with wage work and to what extent it reflected traditional attitudes and values regarding women’s employment emerging from the surrounding normative expectations and patriarchal interventions.

**4.1 Transnational lives: transitions and ties**

Most of these women’s stories begin back in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Hence, their transnational lives cannot be understood in isolation of their national or local pictures, i.e. the contextual factors from their countries of origin before the time of their migration. All of the interviewees reported to have rural cultural orientations from back home and belonged to a lower social class background with low family education. This early background had a particular bearing on these women’s abilities to grasp certain particularities of the western European society (e.g., Choudhury, 2001); migration to the UK was a big leap for all the interviewees which began with a cultural shock and made it difficult for them to cope with the new ways of living. Except for a few, all the interviewees got married in their teenage years. At least one-third of them had given birth to their children back in Bangladesh. In a couple of cases, the interviewees joined their husbands in the UK with one or more children left behind because of the families’ poor financial conditions in the UK. Therefore, by the time these women had the orientations of the new environment and society, either they had given birth to more children born or their children from back home joined them in the UK which made them busier with heavy care responsibilities.

These women’s perceptions and attitudes towards wage work had been formed during the early years of their lives and within the boundaries of their family and social relations where the normative expectations from women had been different (than the UK) under a different gender regime (that had established gendered roles for women) which ring-fenced their imaginations (Bhopal, 2018). When they migrated to the UK, it was not that their bodies had only travelled - their ethnicity, social class, cultural and religious ideologies also travelled with their bodies (Anthias, 2008, 2012). Women suffer disproportionately from the normative expectations and interventions of the society and culture as it is harder for them to cross the class or social boundaries despite crossing the locational boundaries (ibid). In other words, migration tests their boundaries, that is, who belongs to the community, through the reproduction of traditions and upholding cultural values. This is particularly because women have traditionally been considered as the vessel for perpetuating cultural values and traditions.

Some of the second-generation interviewees were not brought to join their families in the UK simply because of their gender identity: Asma, a 62-year-old second-generation South Asian British Bangladeshi migrated to the UK with her husband after her marriage, since she was left behind with her sister’s family back in Bangladesh and not brought to the UK simply because of her gender identity -

Researcher: So, did you come to the UK with your husband?

Interviewee: “Yes. But, I am actually a second-generation British. My parents and the rest of the family were already living here in the UK at the time of my migration. My father came here first and then he brought my mum and my brothers. I was left behind to live with my married sister’s family. My father did not bring me here because I was a girl, and thought I could not possibly earn money by working outside the home...”

- Asma, 62, second-generation British Bangladeshi

She further claimed that living all those years apart from her parents and her family had deeply affected her psychologically. Her account alludes to the conspicuous gender hierarchy within the patriarchal social relations which has been further exposed in the irregularities in these women’s career trajectories throughout the life courses.

The high level of low education in the sample is a further confirmation that the established gender norms within the society these women were brought up in back in the time in their country of origin. On being asked about her educational qualifications, one of the interviewees responded:

Interviewee: “…during those days, girls did not go to school much, and so I did not. My brothers used to go to school. I used to do household chores with my mum at home. But, I learned how to read the Holy Qur’an.”

* Rahima, 62, second-generation British Bangladeshi

Rahima’s account further shows how girls' religious education was prioritised over the conventional education. Here, religion was used as a paradigm to legitimise and institutionalise patriarchy. Their entire childhood and adolescence years were focused on learning household (or better termed as ‘feminised’) skills such as sewing, cooking and cleaning. This had further implications since this set the course for those who opted to join the labour market later after their migration to the UK as in what types of job would be available to them if they ever decided to join.

Another important finding that may have had a hand in shaping these women’s attitudes and behaviour is these women’s strong ancestral ties; however, it does not come across as a prominent theme in the existing research literature (Shah et al., 2010; Modood, 2005; Parekh, 2000). Most of these interviewees travelled back and forth to their countries of origin for most of their lives and at regular intervals. One of the interviewees returned to live in her home country after her birth for a few years and a few others got married in their home country and stayed for a few years after their marriage, had children and then reunited with their family in the UK which further alluded to their keen sense of belongingness to the community and the countries of origin. It was as if they were able to identify themselves as British but did not quite belong here. These ties are further explored in the following accounts:

Interviewee: “I was born here but went to stay in Bangladesh when I was three and stayed until I got married at the age of 15. I know, quite young, right? My first child was born soon, so I stayed there for a few years more. I also had to take private exams for that reason to finish my school…”

* Najma, 61, second-generation British Bangladeshi

Interviewee: “I went to Bangladesh to get married, and stayed there with my husband’s family for two/three years, had my first child and then returned to the UK. I was actually missing my family and friends from here. But, I loved it there (in Bangladesh), too.”

- Fariha, 59, third-generation British Bangladeshi

Interviewee: “I went to Bangladesh to get married and stayed there with my parents-in-law for almost five years after my marriage. My husband was not there with me though. He was working in Saudi Arabia at that time.”

* Asia, 56, second-generation British Bangladeshi

These transnational ties are important from another perspective - these were not mere reflection of physical relocation but also the inheritance of the cultural understanding of caring which can be explored in the following accounts:

Researcher: Why did you quit?

Interviewee: “My parents-in-law visited us in the UK and stayed for three months. I had to look after them and cook for them. I took a break from the job at that time and never thought of re-joining. It just did not happen.”

- Asifa, 53, first-generation British Bangladeshi who worked in the textile industry during the initial period of her migration

Interviewee: “What else could I do? My brother would call me every day and beg to take care of his children…so, I had to quit my job for taking care of them”

- Sajida, 63, first-generation British Bangladeshi who quit her job to care for her disabled brother’s children so that her sister-in-law (who was the breadwinner of her brother’s family) could continue working

Interviewee: “I spent all my savings and even borrowed money to help my stepsons’ businesses and families. I had to. This is what you do. You have to be there for them with everything you have got”

- Sharifa, 61, second-generation British Pakistani

It is evident in these accounts that the intimacies of social relations and the cultural ties conditioned these women into perceiving caring as their raison d’être; it was inconceivable to them not putting everyone else before themselves; not embodying the essence of being a woman: altruism.

Thus, raised in a society that recognised strong assumptions about gender hierarchy translated into particular patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour specific to each gender for these women. This essentialist thinking had repercussions on these women’s private and public lives. In private, essentialist ideas were translated into rules of conduct for the women as wife, mother and daughter. In public, it was believed that women’s participation in the labour market was not necessary and/or unproductive and ineffective. Trapped inside such ‘cult of traditional domesticity’ these women had not been outspoken about the need to challenge the status quo of women’s subordinate social position. The traditional family structure acted as the source of these women’s disempowerment, too.

**4.2 Boundaries and social positioning in the UK: ‘the other’ and the ‘outsider within':**

As these women crossed the borders of their homeland and ventured for new lives in the UK, not only did they enter into a new geographical territory but also were introduced to a new social boundary enforced by the ‘othering process’ (Scharff, 2011; Bowlby and Evans, 2008; Ahmad, 2003) - a process that labelled them socially as a group ‘less desirable’, ‘an outsider’, ’the other’, a process that did not cease to continue with age and time, only heightened instead. Evidence in favour of this argument may be found in the fact that, whereas the dominant discourse (e.g., Abdel-Fadil and Leibmann, 2018) presents Muslim women as hyper-visible (mostly because of their physical appearances and attires), these older South Asian women have mostly been almost invisible socially as well as economically (Mirza, 2012) which is a result of a lack of scopes for their social and economic integration stemming from transnationalism. The boundaries they encountered in the labour market were not only in terms of ‘othering’ in the forms of occupational and racial segregation but also in terms of their diminishing social capital in the old age and lack of integration:

Home carer Rahela, a 56-year-old first-generation British Bangladeshi migrated to the UK as a political asylum seeker and had a better education than most of the cohort. She used to wear hijab at her work. Her account on workplace experiences reflects such clear demarcation of race and religion prevalent in the UK society -

“Some of them (clients) would not want me as their carer. I can recall a couple of incidents where one of the elderly persons I was caring for, used to lock his door behind me so that I could not steal something and run away. He used to behave very badly. He once made an abusive remark when something came on telly about […]. I complained to the office a couple of times, but they said trust would not come easy. I would have to earn it.”

Another interviewee, Faiza, a 62-year-old, first-generation British Bangladeshi who lost her job in the clothing industry in the 80s and had not been able to ‘upskill’ and find another job since that time shared her frustration over lack of opportunities for her in the labour market:

Interviewee: “Who will give me jobs now? They all hire people who can speak English, but, I cannot…”

Another critical element to the articulation of ‘the othering’ was the strict gender hierarchy within their own community in the UK, which made them ‘the second other’. Even if these women were positive about working outside the home, the decision was not theirs to take, i.e. like most other financial and family decisions, decisions related to their work were made by the male members of the families (fathers, husbands and sons) (Shaw, 2014; Dwyer, 2000). All decisions related to the place and type of jobs they would do, the hours they would work and how they should balance between care responsibilities and paid work were made by the male figures of the families:

Interviewee: “That factory was very close to my house, and I could walk there. When it closed down, my husband said there was no need to look for another job since there was no other factories nearby... he said, “it is really not necessary to go that far to work, you know. I will take care of the money matters.”

- Saliha, 62, first-generation British Bangladeshi who lost her factory job during the recession in the 80s and did not do any other paid work since then

Interviewee: “My son says, you don’t need to work now. You are too old to work outside the home.” - Sabira, 58, first-generation British Pakistani

Put simply, these women were not in charge of their own narratives - positioned as the ‘second other’, they felt an acute sense of social powerlessness. This was further amplified by their lack of financial freedom, which translated into a lack of economic power. In addition, most of these women did not consider caring as a ‘skill’ and while caring, and household responsibilities had been limiting their time and possibilities of working outside the home throughout their lives, and they invested all their time and effort into caring, it did not entitle them to any social power in return.

Moreover, their earlier experiences of community support pre-migration were highly satisfactory where they had more than adequate family and community support back in their country of origin. Post-migration, their high expectations of such support from the UK community was only met with disappointment. In these new scenarios, they hung onto what little support they could have but believed it was not enough to motivate them to participate in the labour market. It is worth mentioning here that the community support these women expected were not only in relation to the support for caring and household responsibilities, but also in relation to the support required in times of financial and family crisis such as divorce, fighting loneliness post a partner’s death and even marriage of children:

Rashida, 62, first generation British Bangladeshi had to quit her job to look after her 30-year-old epileptic son. She expressed extreme frustration over the lack of community support in finding a bride for her son -

Interviewee: “Nobody does anything to help you here. Nobody cares. Not only me; there are also other mothers who need help in marrying off their children. But, the community does nothing about it.”

Firoza, 56, first-generation British Bangladeshi also expressed her discontentment about the community support in relation to unhealthy competition to find jobs:

Interviewee: “Where are those jobs? How do we find them? Yes, we do go to the job centre. But, people around here need to spread the words too, right? But no one does. It’s the competition, you know. No one wants you to know about those opportunities.”

So, on top of feeling like ‘an outsider’/ ‘the other’ in the UK society as a result of their gender, racial and religious identities, these women also felt rejected as the ‘outsider within’ by their local ethnic community which further deterred them from active looking for jobs. These findings also indicate that in order to motivate themselves to participate more in the labour market, they needed to achieve that sense of oneness with the UK society, and escape the incessant feeling of otherness within their own local community.

**5. Conclusion**

As Rachel Silvey (2004) points out, feminist views of identity and subjectivity turn us towards an understanding of the migrant self as constituted through a range of intersecting, sometimes competing, forces and processes, and as playing agentic roles within these processes. This has been observed throughout the interview analysis and findings presented in this paper. These women’s transnational lives have been shaped both by the normative factors (that have been either socially, culturally or structurally established) as well as the labour market factors.

To begin with, patriarchal structures of the interviewees’ families meant that as heads of the families, the fathers of these women prioritised the education and career of any male heirs and daughters and wives were entrusted with the household chores/responsibilities only. Further, the normative roles of women as it is understood and expected from the community played an important role in forming their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour and assuming their orientations regarding working outside the home. Later, when these women married men from within the community and with more or less similar social class background and transitioned into mature age, these notions, perceptions and ideologies formed during the early age as informed by the normative expectations of the society were thus by and large reproduced; and, these women merely conformed to the gendered role of primary caregivers of their families. The structure of their families and social relations had been merely the mini-version of the patriarchal structure of the society back in the country of origin. The financial decisions were also made by the male members of the family (husbands and sons), and women were kept away from any decision making with regard to the earnings of the families. Therefore, the normative expectations from women of caregiving became their only reality. On top of this, the ‘perceived’ lack of local community support and suitable job opportunities in the UK labour market acted as additional tools for demoralising them to pursue work outside the home.

The central concern of this paper has been, therefore, to show the inseparability of race and gender and other social categories and how these are embedded in the societal and institutional structures and reflected and shaped these women’s transnational lives. These women refused to see themselves as an individual first, but saw themselves as ‘women’ and all the roles and expectations that come with such identity. I showed here that the concept of intersectionality and translocational positionality, which centres on the variety of axes of demarcation/identities, is useful in understanding their attitudes and social behaviour and that these are conditioned by a variety of forces playing upon the individual both in enabling and constraining ways and options and in shaping their coping strategies as well as lived experiences (Rodriguez et al., 2019). In addition, I showed that paying attention to their life-courses while using intersectionality is not only helpful for understanding the life-long trajectories of older women, but also for interpreting the correlations between the successes and failures of life’s different stages. In essence, what has been flagged up here is the importance of the translocational aspects of social categories and turning points of lives such as migration and marriage, and the importance of the shifts in time, space and location in impacting these women’s perceptions and attitudes and determining their labour market behaviour.

**6. Directions for future research**

The migration studies focused on prime working age migrants while labour market research by and large reproduced the dominant representations of these women of passivity and victimisation in the society. On the other hand, the discourse of gender studies and western feminism often relegated them to a marginal position, using universal labels for ‘South Asian migrant women’ ending up in ignoring the rich variety of cultural, religious and class categories amongst them as well as the age dynamics. These migrant women do not ascribe to the tenets of white western feminism, and thus, there is a need of revising of the rhetoric. Future research therefore, needs to focus more on the translocational intersectional aspects to capture the nuances of their transnational lives - their identities and experiences and understanding to explore and understand their social positions.

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1. <https://www.who.int/ageing/projects/age_friendly_cities_network/en/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/ageing/age-friendly-greater-manchester/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)