THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

How South Asian Muslim Women Negotiate During Arranged Marriage Processes

By

Syeda Zaynab Mahmood

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Faculty Advisor: Alireza Doostdar

Preceptor: Victoria Gross

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**I.** **Introduction**

The main aim of this ethnography is to observe and analyze how South Asian Muslim women within the diaspora negotiate during their arranged marriage process. Using Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) technique of using a practice as diagnostic of power, I analyze the practice of negotiations during the arranged marriage process to illustrate negotiations as saturated within various forms of power. These forms of power include cultural expectations, religious obligations and commitments, and expectations about self-realization tied to women’s diaspora status in American society. This ethnography reveals that consent and coercion are complex and complicated in the lives of the interlocutors, especially during the arranged marriage process. This thesis argues that women within the diaspora negotiate within certain cultural and religious frameworks, which are anchored within the process of self-realization. Further, this thesis argues that forms of power shape understandings of consent and coercion in complex and contradictory ways in the experiences of South Asian Muslim women.

In this paper, I provide an literature review on scholarship concerned with arranged marriages, diaspora, negotiations, and agency. I move on to introduce how I followed Lila Abu Lughod’s (1990) technique and theoretical framework in explaining the underlying commitments of my methodological approach. The following section describes the methodology of the study and then shifts to introducing each of the five interlocutors. I then transition to an in-depth analysis of five interlocutors' transcripts. Lastly, the conclusion section provides a summary of the analysis and offers directions for future research.

Arranged marriages have a strong association with South Asian traditions. Certain practices, within South Asian and diasporic communities, are associated with arranged marriage, such as elder relatives and parents seeking out potential spouses and appointing a rishta auntie, an elder of the community, to search for a spouse on behalf of the family. The significance of caste, occupation, citizenship, marriage within the extended family, visiting the woman’s family for chai to “view the bride,” dowry, and mahr[[1]](#footnote-1) are also important elements of the process. The traditions of arranged marriage and the practices are diverse, varying by region, religion, caste, class, family preference, and individual interpretations.

While the practice of arranged marriage has a long history, the practices associated with arranged marriage have changed and transformed over time. Practices such as searching for a spouse from the same class or seeking family approval have transformed to various degrees and are prioritized by families and individuals at varying degrees (Aguiar, 2013). Elements associated with Western love narratives such as companionate marriage and sexual desire have been introduced to the more contemporary practices of arranged marriages (Ibid, 2013). Further, Internet and WhatsApp profiles have aided in changing the practices as well as assisted in merging the traditional practice of arranged marriages with ideas and activities associated with “love-marriages,” such as adult children finding their own spouse and introducing said spouse to their parents early in the relationship (Ibid, 2013).

As practices and traditions transform with time, the general conceptualization of arranged marriage within academic literature has stayed within the bounds of a narrow set of practices and concept. For example, in Rochana Majumdar’s (2009) study on late colonial period Bengali marriages, she defines arranged marriage as “marriages negotiated by the families (patrilineal) of men and women with or without the consent of those getting married and celebrated at a wedding in accordance with certain communally sanctioned rules and rituals,” (Majumdar, 5). Majumdar places emphasis on the form of courtship (negotiation), the agents (families), the ritual nature of the wedding itself, and the structure of the joint family. This essay follows suit, placing emphasis on negotiations, family and elders, and the arranged marriage process in general.

**II.** **Literature Review**

In my study, I investigated how Muslim women of South Asian descent in the American Midwest negotiate their needs and desires during arranged marriage processes. My work sheds light on the strategies South Asian Muslim women deploy to negotiate between family, gendered cultural expectation, religious commitments, and their own aspirations while going through the process of an arranged marriage. Their experiences reflect broader gendered tensions between collective normative demands and individual desires that are, nonetheless, influenced by community demands.

Scholarship on South Asian womanhood within the diaspora has explored how women become symbolic of the home, appointed as the bearers of culture and the reproducers of tradition (Rudrappa, 2002; Shukla 2003). Dasgupta and Dasgupta (1996) have argued that women in migrant communities are tasked with maintaining their families’ honor. Additionally, Espin (1995) found that in immigrant communities, women’s roles and behaviors are consistently evaluated by others because they are perceived as guardians of tradition. These scholars highlight the ways' ethnic identity for individuals and families within the diaspora is inextricably linked to the regulation of women’s behaviors. Scholars have also observed that in South Asian immigrant communities, marriage is both a commitment to a partner and a practice seen to maintain and reproduce culture, language, caste, and religion, thus, making marriage a key part of diasporic identity construction (Samuel, 2010).

The literature illustrates that within the diaspora, marriage is a prominent experience for South Asian women, and is anchored within family norms and expectations as well as robust cultural and religious frameworks. Further, the literature highlights how women play a particular role in cultural reproduction and that marriage is one avenue in which said reproduction occurs. This ethnography is situated within this understanding, as an underlying aim of this study is to observe how women make sense of the arranged marriage processes and observe the frameworks which inform women’s perception of marriage (e.g., tradition, religious obligation), and better situate these perceptions and understandings within women’s desires and negotiations.

From the perspective of women themselves, vexed processes of self-making emerge in the context of religious institutions and marriage arrangement. Fariha Khan’s (2015) ethnography of South Asian Muslim women in Quranic study groups found women constructed identities that connected them to their places of birth while remaining firmly rooted in the United States. She found that daily practice and expressions of folkloric traditions strengthened the ways women made sense of their positionality in the United States. Negotiations of positionality as both individually and collectively determined emerge in Divya Patel’s (2017) study of British born South Asian woman. Patel’s interlocutors explained that familial permission is fundamental and claimed that being given a choice is indirect permission for women to exercise agency and express their own needs. Experience of choice was meaningful for Patel’s interlocutors, as this gave them opportunities for self-expression. The aforementioned scholarship highlights that women’s positionality is subject to change. Further, moments of identity construction and self-realization are not siloed events, but rather often tied to cultural and religious traditions to some extent. This thesis sought to explore this further and observe women’s positionality within the marriage process to trace the ways in which family, culture, and religion inform shifts in women’s positionality during different phases of the marriage process, and determine the impact said shifts have on women’s strategies for negotiating.

Though women experienced subtle pressures to uphold cultural duties, Patel observed moments of personal agency and pushing of gender boundaries during marriage talks (Patel, 2017). Further, some women felt objectified to some extent due to their lack of involvement within the marriage process (Patel, 2017). While the literature demonstrates that practicing embodied cultural and religious elements is foundational to South Asian diasporic identity, my ethnographic study explores the tensions between cultural and religious elements and desires as they appear during negotiations and sheds light on the ways this tension is managed by women and their families. Further, I will elucidate the ways desire informed and was shaped by the women’s identity construction and how negotiating their desires affected my interlocutors' self-perceptions.

Contemporary ethnographies do not shed much light on how women negotiate the tensions and dilemmas they face during the initial stages of an arranged marriage process, or, importantly, what they desire. On a more general level, Marcia Hermansen’s and Mahruq Khan’s (2009) study of South Asian Muslim young adults in the United States observed some ways young adults negotiated aspects of their American, South Asian, and Muslim identities. Negotiations enabled them to construct an identity that they viewed as internally consistent while being true to their religion, their parents’ culture, and the context in which they were growing up. Further, Hermansen and Khan found that autonomy was shown by the ability to make choices as part of a “complex navigation” of multiple identities. These choices included acts of resistance both within the context of a girl’s family and community and acts of opposition to norms and expectations of Western majority populations (Hermansen & Khan, 2009). The literature assists in positioning this study within questions of negotiations. While Khan and Hermansen’s studies illustrate a connection between negotiations, identity construction, the family, and culture, questions remain on the kinds of strategy women employ to negotiate, what informs the content of their negotiations, and what role negotiations play in women’s experiences of arranged marriage.

**III.**  **Theoretical Framework**

I aim to center the personal narratives of South Asian Muslim women to redirect analysis away from harmful stereotypes of oppressed, powerless Muslim women. To this end, I will employ Lila Abu-Lughod's method of using a practice as a diagnostic of power. While resistance was the practice Abu-Lughod focused on, negotiations are the main object of this study to identify the structures and practices that uphold power and authority as it exists in the lives of South Asian Muslim women. Abu Lughod extends Foucault’s framework of power, where power is something that works ‘not just negatively, by denying, restricting, prohibiting, or repressing, but also positively, by producing forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourses,’ (Abu-Lughod, 1990, pg. 42). For Abu-Lughod, resistance is not simply a sign of human freedom but should be used strategically to learn more about forms of power and how women are caught up in them. By observing the practice of negotiations as diagnostic of power, something can be uncovered about the various forms of power South Asian Muslim women experience within a tradition guided by cultural and religious frameworks, particularly in the context of diaspora. The other advantage of using negotiations as a diagnostic of power is that it can detect historical shifts in configurations or methods of power (Abu-Lughod, 1990). By looking at the women’s experiences, something important can be learned about the dynamics of power in situations where diaspora and immigrant communities are being incorporated and integrated into Western spaces.

In her article, *The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women*, Abu-Lughod opens with the question of, ‘what are the implications of studies of resistance for our theories of power? (Abu-Lughod, 1990, pg. 41). This question is born out of tendency of romanticizing resistance and analyzing resistance for Muslim women simply as an ‘ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated,’(Ibid, pg. 42). Abu-Lughod argues for a shift towards a more generative analysis of resistance, where resistance is a diagnostic tool to identify forms of power and how people are 'caught up in them,’ (Ibid, pg. 42). The shift in approach moves away from simply observing and explaining resistance and move towards ‘methodological strategies for the study of power in particular situations,’ (Ibid, pg. 42).

With resistance being newly positioned, Abu-Lughod aims to trace the ‘complex workings of social power’ through acts of resistance and to highlight how this tracing enables us to ‘trace how power relations are historically transformed-especially with the introduction of forms and techniques of power characteristic of modern states and capitalist economies,’ (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Further, she hopes that her shifted approach will show the ways in which ‘intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together these days in communities that are gradually becoming more tied to multiple and often nonlocal systems,’ (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Abu-Lughod’s conceptualization of power helped to situate the life experiences and narratives of South Asian Muslim women within the context of space and time. This perspective provided a robust theoretical framework to investigate negotiations and locate it within the complex workings of power as it emerges in the lives of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora.

**IV.** **Methodology**

*1.1. Ethnographic Interviews*

Given the aims of this research, I deemed a qualitative methodology as most appropriate approach, as it centers experiences and reflections on experiences. Ethnographic interview methods were employed to obtain perceptions and experiences of marriage, as well as to assess the multi-contextual shaping of vocabulary through which perceptions are filtered and constructed. A central priority of this research was to document how women approach negotiations and observe how people reacted to their vocalized needs and desires. I asked questions regarding who they voiced their needs and desires to, how these negotiations were considered during decision making, where they found moments of agency, and how they asserted their own voices in processes of collective decision making. I further explored participants’ experiences of the marriage process to understand if any support was received, identify said support, and the implications of these experiences. I paid close attention to how women described who and what shaped their movements and agency and how this had changed throughout the marriage process.

Further, to identify power relations, I conducted the semi-structured interviews that encourage storytelling. This method provided women the space to choose what they wanted to include in their answers. Storytelling also allowed me to observe women’s agency in play with the sociocultural structures in their lives. Moreover, this approach allowed me to identify the ways in which women were constructing their understandings of themselves, their worlds, and the ways the two interact. Direct answers provided a particular form of insight, while the gaps and ambiguities left by their answers informed me of how they construct their understandings. Semi-structured interviews provided a rich source of imageries and signifiers that linked to how women constructed themselves and their worlds through the indication of symbolic and emotional value that women attached to different objects, experiences, and behaviors. This method allowed me to observe the complex interplay of between objects, experiences, and behaviors, as well as points of discontinuity among them.

*1.2. Criteria and Recruitment*

As I was interested in how women negotiated during marriage talks, the interlocutors were limited only to women who were married through an arranged marriage. WhatsApp group chats were used as a recruiting tool for participants. General information about the research was posted on Muslim women community group chats associated with masjids and communities across Southeastern Michigan. I also relied on the snowballing technique to make use of participants as a resource through word of mouth, so that others were able to recommend people who they knew had an arranged marriage.

*1.3. Interview Guide*

The interview questions were broken down into the following nine sections: (1) basic questions, (2) rishta process[[2]](#footnote-2), (3) discussing marrying spouse and negotiations, (4) baat pakki[[3]](#footnote-3), (5) other event planning, (6) decision making, (7) talking about marriage, (8) nikkah, shaadi, and ruksathi, [[4]](#footnote-4)and lastly, (9) marriage currently. Questions were developed to encourage storytelling and to share details such as who, what, where, and why. This was done to generate data on similar events and experiences so that details could be compared, and cross analyzed across each transcript. Further, such questions gave insight into the institutions, processes, and interactions that shaped the women's experiences. The interview guide was structured to hear each woman’s experience in the order they experienced it, thus leading with questions of rishtas and ending with questions regarding their current marriage. This sequencing methodology helped to create a timeline for each woman and place moments of negotiations within each timeline. Questions were also structured to bring out how women felt throughout their experience and encouraged them to reflect.

*1.4. Data Engagement*

Interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom, recorded, and uploaded to Otter.ai, an online software that develops speech to text transcription. The software was used to partially transcribe interviews as well as provide timestamps for quotes. I listened to each interview and reacted to the interview in real time on a separate document. This method of engagement allowed me to focus on particular moments that were of interest, such as negotiating and dynamics between women and their rishtas. Further, this method allowed me to apply summative coding to areas of interest, pull quotes, and document timestamps. My decision to develop partial transcriptions allowed for focus on details, such as hesitations, restarts, and cut-offs in participants' speech.

To ensure the integrity of the interlocutors’ emotional content, such as intonation, laughter, and silences, I relied on a notation system that would describe such content (e.g. [laughter]). Further, this study practiced ethnographic refusal (Simpson, 2014). Ethnographic refusal refers to instances in which an interlocutor refuses to engage in a particular topic of conversation explicitly or through moments of silence and topic change or suggests to a researcher that something should not be published. This ethnography strives to ‘engage generatively’ with refusals by interpreting refusals within their historical or cultural context, without revealing the content (Simpson, 2007). While listening to the interviews, I paid attention to straightforward moments of refusal and moments of hesitation and topic change. These were considered as moments of participant refusal that I followed.

Participants’ transcripts were analyzed individually, and initial notes and exploratory notes were documented as were emerging themes. All notes and emerging themes were reflected through the notation system as followed: (COMPARE WITH OTHER WOMEN), (RELIGIOUS FRAMING), (CULTURAL FRAMING) (interesting how...[analysis]). This notation system aided in organizing the data to be more manageable during later in-depth analysis. Through open coding, the first reading of the transcripts was deepened through layered analysis of repeated themes and styles of narration.

To analyze the data from initial individual documents, I created a second document with headings labeled after the emerging themes and similar experiences I reconciled between all five interviews. Some of these headings include the following: rishta meetings, discussing marriage to rishta with parents, negotiations, dealbreakers, sex, conceptions of marriage, mahr, and religious framing. Under each heading, I pasted summative codes and direct quotes. Given the complexity of the stories shared by my interlocutors, some summative codes and direct quotes were placed underneath multiple headings. This method allowed me to trace the connections between themes and connections between different experiences for each individual woman as well as a group. After I completed this form of open coding, I analyzed the quotes and codes underneath each heading to observe commonalities and to build a narrative around each heading. This was the last step in my data analysis.

**V. Introducing Interlocutors**

I interviewed five South Asian Muslims who self-identify as Sunni Muslim women. While each woman identifies as Sunni, it is unknown which one of the four traditional major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali) each follows. Further, each woman in the study identifies as cisgender and heterosexual and are likewise married to cisgender heterosexual men. Women in this study were also from lower to upper middle class and all graduated high school. Some women graduated from a graduate program while others were still in the midst of an undergraduate degree. Each woman either was working or had the intention to work upon completion of a degree at the time of the interviews. The following paragraphs provides further detail about each interlocutor.

*Munaza,* 28 years old, met her rishta when she was 26 and he was 27. Prior to meeting her husband, Munaza met seven rishtas in person and in total, had around fifteen rishtas. She has two siblings, a married brother who is 30 and a younger sister who is 23 and unmarried. Munaza is ethnically Hyderabadi, with her mother and father’s family having ancestral ties to Hyderabad, India. Her mother was born in Hyderabad, India and her father was born in Karachi, Pakistan. Her paternal grandparents were born and raised in Hyderabad, India until the 1947 Partition, where they resettled in Karachi, Pakistan. Her maternal grandparents stayed in India after Independence and the 1947 Partition. Munaza’s mother migrated to Pakistan for medical school and received Munaza’s father as a rishta from Munaza’s paternal grandpa’s cousin, who was friends with Munaza’s maternal grandpa. Her parents were engaged for three years before they were married and talked frequently over the phone and through letters. Munaza was born in Pakistan but migrated to America as a child and identifies as part of the diaspora. She grew up in a suburban upper middle-class neighborhood and has a doctorate degree in pharmacy, working full time. She is a hijabi[[5]](#footnote-5), has been married for almost two years, and currently lives in a combined family in a suburban middle-class neighborhood.

*Alia*, 20, is currently completing her Bachelor’s of Science and lives with her parents and siblings in a suburban middle-class neighborhood. Her spouse is 26 and lives in a different state, where he works full time. Alia has three siblings, a sister who is 17, and two brothers who are 6 and 9. Her and her husband travel back and forth to visit each other throughout the year. Alia is of Hyderabadi ancestry, where both her mother and father’s family were born and raised in Hyderabad.

*Zubia*, 26, met her first and only rishta when she was 20 and he was 25. She was the first to get married out of her two still unmarried brothers, who are 23 and 27. In total, Zubia received five rishtas but only met with one rishta in person, who is now her husband. She is ethnically Bihari, with her paternal and maternal grandparents born and raised in Bihar, India. Zubia’s father was born in Bangladesh, then called East Pakistan, as a refugee in Bihar Colony which is located near Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her mother was born in Karachi, Pakistan. Zubia’s parents are distant relatives. Her paternal grandfather brought her father as a rishta for her mother to her maternal grandparents. Her parents met the day of their wedding and did not see a photo of one another prior to the wedding. Zubia graduated from medical school and is currently completing residency in pediatrics. She has been married for three years but given her medical school education and her husband’s residency program, they have been long distance for the entirety of their marriage but will be living together for the first time in their marriage soon. Zubia used to be a hijabi during her undergraduate studies and she is currently deciding if she wants to wear the hijab again.

*Hania,* 22, met her rishta when she was 21 and he was 23. Before meeting her husband, Hania received three other rishtas. She has four siblings, two sisters who are 33 and 32 and two brothers, who are 31 and 26. She was the last of her siblings to get married. Hania is ethnically Hyderabadi and has ancestral ties to Hyderabad, India. Her maternal and paternal grandparents and parents were all born and raised in Hyderabad. Her family decided to remain in India after Independence and the 1947 Partition. Hania’s paternal uncle was friends with Hania’s mother’s cousin and introduced her father to the cousin as a rishta. Her parents were shown a photo of each other and met for the first time on their wedding day. Hania was born and raised in the United States and grew up in an upper middle-class suburban neighborhood. She is a hijabi and currently lives in a city with her husband, whom she has been married to for eight months. Hania is currently completing her Bachelor’s of Science and has a position as a pharmacy technician.

*Mariam, 28,* met her rishta when she was 21 and her husband was 26. Mariam’s husband was the first rishta she received. Her father was informed about the rishta through Mariam’s grandma’s cousin. Mariam is multi-ethnic. Her paternal grandpa is from Agra, India and her paternal grandmother is Pathan and was born in Afghanistan, later moving to India. Her maternal grandparents are from Kanpur, India. Her paternal and maternal grandparents moved to Pakistan after the 1947 Partition, living in Quetta and Lahore before settling in Karachi, where both her parents were born. Mariam’s mother’s cousin was her father’s neighbor. The cousin told Mariam’s maternal grandma about Mariam’s father. The two families met and finalized the marriage between Mariam’s parents. Her parents met for the first time on their wedding day. Mariam identifies her ancestry in Pakistan and identifies as being part of “Urdu speaking” ethnic groups. Mariam has three brothers who are 28, 27, and 21. Out of all of her siblings, she was the first to get married. Mariam was born in the United States and grew up in a lower middle-class suburban neighborhood. She currently lives in an upper middle-class suburb with her husband and young son. She has been married for five years. Mariam is a hjabi, has a master’s degree, and is currently is employed full-time in an HR department as a talent recruiter.

**VI.** **Analysis**

*1.1. Rishta Process*

South Asian Muslim arranged marriage processes are made up of complex experiences of consent, dynamics between parents, women’s self-advocacy, and cultural and religious frameworks. It is important to sift through each of these components to understand women’s positionality and experiences during an arranged marriage process and within their sociocultural reality. Thus, my analysis begins with introducing the arranged marriage process. This introduction provides the necessary context to position where in the marriage process negotiations began, how, and with whom. Each of my interlocutors was introduced to their current spouses through a rishta process, a traditional South Asian marriage process wherein their parents seek out potential spouses for their children. Of the five women who were interviewed, one was forced to marry through emotionally coercive measures. The remaining four women consented to their marriages.

In the South Asian Muslim arranged marriage processes, the first stage involves parents receiving rishtas, or potential spouses, through community networking and group messaging. Parents are either introduced or reach out to a parent of the rishta with the explicit hope of exploring the rishta and family with the intention of finalizing a marriage. Thus, the process of finding rishtas for their children requires parents to maintain some form of community ties. This can be observed in the experiences of all five women, as their parents were informed of a rishta through some familial and community network they were part of, locating the arranged marriage process as both a private and social endeavor for families. For example, Zubia received her rishta after she attended a wedding and her husband’s aunt saw her. The aunt approached Zubia’s mother and asked if her mother is looking for a rishta for Zubia. They exchanged numbers and later spoke about the rishta.

While familial and community networks are often utilized, rishta aunties also play a critical role. For example, Alia’s mother was informed by a rishta auntie that there was “a young man looking for a wife.” Alia’s mom asked the rishta auntie for more detail about the rishta and the rishta auntie connected Alia’s mother with the rishta’s mother. Rishta aunties are elders in a community who are often married with children of their own. Families commission rishta aunties to find a rishta on the family’s behalf through word of mouth and by sharing biodatas and photos through a curated network. Some rishta aunties assist families for free while others require a fee to search on a family’s behalf and a payment if she successfully arranges a marriage for the family. Families and rishta aunties engage in various degrees of communication, networking, and socializing to successfully arrange marriages. Further, the process of finding a rishta requires, to some extent, active presence within one’s community, such as attending weddings as seen in Zubia’s case, or knowing who the rishta aunties are in the community.

More recently, WhatsApp has been used to create group chats where parents send photos and biodatas of their children who they wish to see married. There is no particular order in which biodata’s and photos are posted in chats. The timing of when biodatas and photos are sent to a group chat relies on when the parents wish to begin the search for a rishta for their child. Parents can participate in chats by either posting their own child’s biodata and photo, or by simply joining the group to read other people’s biodatas without posting their child’s biodata. Below are three examples[[6]](#footnote-6) of WhatsApp groups and group descriptions[[7]](#footnote-7):

*Example 1: Umeed Matrimonial (Group chat name):* We are dedicated to helping families connect with each other and help their loved ones find suitable matches and have happy unions Ameen.

Based in US, Canada, UK, Pakistan. Our group will be updated every Tuesday & Friday with all marriage profiles in sha Allah.

Please complete the Google document attached[[8]](#footnote-8) below to help us connect you with a suitable match.

*Example 2: Masood Matrimony America 1 (Group chat name):* This is a matrimonial service which aims to find suitable match for our children. Please join our Whatsapp group to help us to help you. Our only fee is your “DUA”[[9]](#footnote-9) for us and 4 our ummah[[10]](#footnote-10)

(yellow emoji backhand index pointing down) RULES

(red emoji cross mark) MATCH MAKERS R NOT ALLOWED IN GROUPS.

(red emoji cross mark) SOCIAL POSTS R NOT ALLOWED IN GROUPS.

(red emoji cross mark) ONLY PROFILE NO PIC

(red emoji cross mark) WE DO NOT PROVIDE ANY GUARANTY OF ANY PROFILE POSTED HERE

\*(Admins phone numbers and emails listed)\*

*Example 3: CMS 1 (Group chat name):* This group serves only Muslim citizens, the permanent residents of visa holders of USA, Canada, and UK. The holders of the visit visa to these countries must present a copy of visa before they can be entered in the group.

Our group Admins are Shagufta, Erum, Maymunah and Afreen. Contact them by text for any questions. \*(Phone numbers and emails listed)\*

JazakaAllah khair.

CMS Admins.

In these groups, biodatas are posted without a photo. A biodata is in some ways a resume and includes information such as age, height, skin tone, caste, family members, occupation, education, nationality/citizenship, and residence. Below are two examples of biodatas[[11]](#footnote-11):

***Example 1:***

**PERSONAL DETAILS**

Gender: Female

Nationality: Pakistani

Resident Country: Pakistan

Marital Status: Never married

Age: 24

Height: 5’1

Color: Fair, beautiful

Personal profile: Decent personality, friendly, caring and thoughtful about responsibilities

**EDUCATION**

BBA from CBM. Currently doing MBA IN MARKETING from CBM

**PROFESSION**

Job / Business: Used to work with Shan foods, Currently running a home based textile business to sell hand made dresses.

Job Location: Karachi

**FAMILY DETAILS**

Father: Sindhi Sunni

Mother: Working women

Siblings: 2 younger brothers studying. 1 older married sister, MBA, resides in Canada

Caste: Shaikh, Sindhi

**SEEKING**

Marital Status: Never married

Age: 27-28

Height: 5 3’to 5’7

Education: Masters or equivalent

Caste: Sindhi

Country: flexible

(Contact information provided)

***Example 2:***

MALE

Age: 40 Years

Height: 5’8"

Residence: Toronto Canada

Education: Computer engineer

Profession: Working As Consultant as well As Running own business

Legal Status: Canadian

Marital Status: Un Married

Ethnicity: Hyderabad

Caste: Syed

Religious Sect: Sunni

**Family details:**

Father: business

Mother: Housewife

Number of Siblings: 1 brother (1 married)

Language: English, Urdu

Hobbies: cooking, Pray regularly (Alhumdo lillah) fasting during Ramadan, Traveling, Meeting family & Friends

\*LOOKING FOR FEMALE\*

Hijabi: Non Hijabi

Age: 25 years

Height : 5'5"

Residence: Anywhere in Canada USA/ UK/ India/ Pakistan / Middle east

Education: Any

Marital Status: unmarried

Profession: Not necessary

Religious Sect: Muslim – Sunni

Ethnicity: Pakistani / Indian /Arab

(Contact information provided)

Parents review the biodata and photo and decide if they would like to connect with the respective parent to further discuss family details and the rishta. The women in this study all were informed by their parents that their parents found a rishta through either WhatsApp, familial ties, community networking and participation, or a rishta auntie.

The beginning processes of an arranged marriage includes decision-making that involves parents and the desires they have for their child and their child’s future spouse. During this stage of the arranged marriage process, none of the women in the study were involved in finding a spouse aside from being shown biodatas and photos their parents thought appropriate to show their daughter. The appropriateness of the potential spouse can be measured by the parents’ desires for their child. This means that if a parent desires that their child marry someone whose profession is respectful (in their eyes), is from the same caste, and of the same skin tone, the parents would consider people whose biodatas meet those desires. Those who are not in a particular caste or profession would not be considered by the parent nor will the biodata of that person be shared with their child.

Once a parent is satisfied by a biodata, they may speak with the rishta’s parents to gain more information about the family background and the rishta. This is a vetting process where parents can ask about the information provided in the biodata. This stage of the process often does not include either of the adult children. However, the adult children are partially part of the content of the conversations being had. All the women in this study stated that their parents partook in this form of initial conversations with their now in-laws. While women were not aware of the exact content of the conversations, they assumed the parents discussed family backgrounds as this is how initial conversations are often conducted during the arranged marriage process. At this point in the process, women’s biodata and photo are representing her and to some extent, her family. If the parents believe there is the potential for marriage, they then inform their adult child. The ways in which they inform their adult child varies. For the women in this study, women were either shown the man’s biodata and photo or told to get dressed for guests who are coming over to see her. This is the first time in the arranged marriage process that the women in this study were involved and expected to partake in the process, either by saying no to the rishta or moving forward to get married to the rishta.

Out of the five women interviewed for this study, two of their fathers already spoke directly to the rishta before the women themselves were informed that there was a rishta. Out of the five women, two were shown the biodata and photo prior to talking to them (in-person or virtually). Three of the women were told a few hours before someone was coming to see them. This was the first time the women learned about the rishta. The three women were not shown a photo or biodata, nor did they have any kind of information regarding the rishta. At this stage in the arranged marriage process, parents were primarily involved, and women were later pulled in when it was time to meet the rishta, which can lead to the decision to move forward or to say no. The parents engaged in decision-making several times before women were included. These decisions led to women being introduced to a rishta.

Prior to the rishta arriving, the women in this study who knew about the rishta days before the visit participated in prepping for the visit by cleaning and cooking. The women who were not made aware until a few hours before the meeting were told only to get dressed. When the women first spoke to the rishta, they were not alone for a majority of the time. Due to COVID-19, in-person meetings were not the first form of interaction for two of the women. Across all five interviews, women were accompanied by their parents, siblings, and sometimes other important elders in the family such as uncles and grandparents during the first meeting. This positioned women within a family unit while simultaneously being represented by her family. The rishta’s side was accompanied by similar family members. With both adult children represented by family, not only are the woman and man able to meet one another, but the two families are able to interact. The first meeting is not to only determine if the rishta is compatible but if the man’s family is compatible with the woman’s family and vice versa. Further, the meeting of families points to family interests being an essential element in the arranged marriage process and in decision-making, as already observed in the initial stages of parents sifting through biodatas and photos.

Four of the five women were explicitly told they could have some alone time with the rishta. One woman remained with the families and did not speak directly to the rishta. Of the women who spoke to the rishta, three out of four women engaged in “surface level,” conversations. One of the women, Munaza, engaged in conversation about dealbreakers with the rishta. Munaza stated they both wanted spouses who “did not drink or smoke.” The rishta told her that he “already bought a house and that his parents and younger brother would live with him as a combined family.” Historically, the joint/combined families in South Asia and diasporic communities considers the extended family as one household (Aguiar, 2013). Arranged marriages with combined families are also historically considered an economic system, where the daughter-in-law contributes her unpaid and/or paid labor to her husband’s family, often supervised by her mother-in-law (Majumdar, 2009). Previous scholarship has observed that this system places the mother-in-law at the center of power within the combined family unit (Majumdar, 2009; Aguiar, 2013).

When asked how she felt about a combined family during the interview, Munaza stated that a “combined family was a dealbreaker before but rishtas were not sticking around,” when she would tell past rishtas that she “didn’t want to live with her in-laws.” Further, she said that “the eldest son will always have that responsibility.” Here, Munaza referred to the cultural framing of responsibilities sons have towards their parents, where the eldest son is expected to care for their elder parents by providing housing, resources, and support. The wife of the eldest son is expected to contribute to the care of her husband’s parents. The eldest son is expected to live with his parents, his wife, and children as one household. Munaza shared that transitioning into a joint family was difficult. Her mother-in-law often told her son, Munaza’s husband, to let Munaza know that she would like Munaza to “cook more often and cook traditional meals rather than American.”

Munaza also stated that sharing a space with her in-laws was difficult as making decisions regarding the home often prioritized her mother-in-law rather than her. For example, when it came time to pick out new couches, Munaza wanted to pay for the couches. Her mothers-in-law's choice of leather couches was purchased instead of Munaza’s choice. Munaza did not want to outwardly object to her mother in law’s desire for the leather couches. She shared, “the house feels like my mother-in-laws home, not mine. All the décor is her preference. I was paying for the couches but still didn't get to choose which ones we would get.”

*1.2. Negotiations With Rishta*

Upon meeting their rishtas formally, all five women proceeded to move forward with the rishta towards marriage. For some women, the rishta they married was not their first rishta while for others, it was the only rishta they had received. It is important to note again that of the five, one woman, Zubia, was coerced to proceed with the marriage. She told her parents she did not want to marry the rishta but her father proceeded to inform the rishta’s father that they accept the marriage offer. As all women navigated this forward movement towards marriage, they began to converse with the rishta directly as well as with the rishta’s parents to some extent. Given geographical distance, some women were not able to consistently engage with their rishta in-person and mostly communicated virtually. Of the five women, only Zubia had supervised in person hangouts with her rishta, either at her parents’ home or in public with her brother, though she communicated with him via text and phone calls unsupervised like the other four women. It was during these direct text conversations and phone calls that women primarily negotiated their terms for marriage. Further, it is during these conversations that women shift from being represented or representing family to being a benefactor to negotiations.

At this point in the arranged marriage process, women have not yet confirmed they would like to marry the rishta (aside from Zubia). However, the process continues because they have not yet said no. Further, it is during this stage of the arranged marriage process where women decide the trajectory of the process (marriage or starting over with another rishta). This decision is made by the woman and is informed by her interactions with the rishta. The parents of both the woman and the rishta are sidelined to an extent so the woman and man can learn more about one another. This creates a shift in women’s positionality within the process than as previously observed, where women were not directly involved in sifting through biodatas and setting up the initial meeting with the rishta. The woman’s position within the overall arranged marriage process is not stagnant. Rather, it shifts depending on who must be making decisions during a particular stage of the arranged marriage process. Because four of the five women were expected to genuinely consent to the marriage, their positionality is shifted through parental support to make the decision to move forward. To make an informed decision, the woman must be at the forefront of conversations and of interactions with the rishta, creating a need for a change in positionality. Further, a woman’s position does not shift until her parents decide it is time to include her in the process and to have her partake in the decision making. This anchors women’s positionality to their parents’ desires and decision-making. The arranged marriage process, thus, does not include only the desires of women, but also their parents.

The conversations between women and rishtas provides insight into the ways in which women navigated negotiations and reveals details on the content of negotiations. It is important to note that of the five women interviewed, negotiations were not explicitly called negotiations. Rather, negotiations were referred to as “discussions”, “dealbreakers”, “expectations”, “non-negotiables”, and more. For the purposes of this analysis, conversations centered on women’s desires and women advocating for those desires will be referred to as negotiations. Each woman advocated for themselves and often questioned cultural and religious tendencies that occur in traditional marital dynamics within their sociocultural reality. For example, Alia stated that her and her rishta spoke about “more fundamental things,” such as “what is important to each of them.” Her rishta wanted her to move to Michigan after the wedding but Alia replied saying she did not want to move to Michigan because her university was in her home state. Further, when she told him her reasoning as to why she would not move, he was supportive as he “understood why it’s better for me [Alia] to finish my education here.” Further, she stated that she wanted to work after being married and her rishta stated he was okay with a working wife. Alia also brought up traveling alone with her rishta as she wanted to ensure she would be “allowed to do that once married.”

Hania, another woman, stated her conversations with her rishta were not “too much in depth,” and included “basic stuff” about where her and her rishta “stand in terms of like religious beliefs and all that.” She went further on to say that she inquired about his expectations, especially in terms of her “being educated, like where does he stand with me being educated?” Further, she asked “kind of like important questions, like traveling alone.” Hania also asked her rishta about expectations, where they spoke about the “Islamic expectations of a husband and a wife, like the financial responsibility of basic stuff, respect, love and kindness between each other.” Mariam, another woman, stated that she focused on the “freedoms of a Muslim woman,” including talking about if her rishta would care if she decided to no longer wear a hijab as it was her “choice to wear it in the first place so it is my choice to not wear it. Would he have an issue with that?” Mariam stated that she wanted to take care “of her fears” and so was “very blunt” during her initial conversations with her rishta. Mariam, like Hania and Alia, also asked about traveling alone and working. When talking about how she asked her rishta about what he thought about her traveling alone, she added “my dad has issues with me traveling alone so I wanted to see how he would feel.”

All the women felt “comfortable” stating their wants and needs and felt that the rishta also provided details on their wants and needs as well. For example, Mariam stated that her rishta informed her of his “religious values that he wants to see in his household, like praying and just staying close to the religion.” When asked about her talking about her values, Mariam stated that she tells her friends that “there are a lot of filters we put on when trying to find a spouse but at the end of the day, very little matters. A person’s circumstances can change quickly. You can’t say you want to marry a lawyer. You have to look at their values.” Turning to Munaza, she discussed what was expected of her as a wife living in a combined family. She was informed by her rishta that she expected was expected “to cook” and help “keep the house clean.” She shared some concern with this as she intended to work full-time. She replied to her rishta and said she would “try to cook on days off of work and help do the dishes after she came home from work,” to create some balance in what was expected of her.

While Zubia’s marriage was not consensual, she too participated in direct negotiations with her rishta. Zubia informed her rishta she wanted his help in housework and that as a wife, she did not want to be confined to “the cultural and restricted values like staying at home and taking care of the in-laws.” Zubia continued and stated, “taking care of your [rishta] parents is fard[religious duty] on the son,” and told her rishta “the culture is creating restrictions.” Her rishta informed her that he “was not as set-in stone in his values” as Zubia’s values were but he knew that he “wanted a family.” Further, Zubia and her rishta discussed religion, family, and their childhood. Zubia’s rishta wanted them to undergo pre-marital therapy with an Imam. It was during those sessions that Zubia and her rishta talked about the role of a spouse. The conversation centered on “balance and equality,” including Zubia “working and upkeeping the home,” as well as her and her rishta “sharing household responsibilities.”

Women relied on their negotiations to ensure they could travel, continue their education, work, and make other decisions, such as on hijab. Women were not able to confirm if their parents negotiated on their behalf nor confirm the content of their parent’s negotiations. As previously discussed, women’s positionality shifts as they navigate distinct stages of the arranged marriage process. These shifts are anchored in their parent’s decision to change their daughter’s positionality. Thus, the conversations women have with their rishtas are the primary times where women can explicitly discuss their desires, dealbreakers, and negotiate the terms on which they will agree to marry the rishta. For the women in this study, these conversations were unsupervised, and majority of the content of the conversations were not shared with parents. Because women’s positionality does not shift entirely on their own but partially because of their parents, their agency and power within the process is scattered at points within the marriage process where the women must decide on a matter or contribute to a decision. The conversation’s women had with their rishtas illustrates that women used negotiations as way to access and practice their dispersed agency and power. They led conversations and inquired about the rishta’s beliefs on how women could practice and assert their agency and power within the marriage as they practiced and asserted their agency and power through negotiating. This is seen in how women asked their rishta how they felt about having a wife who works or wants to travel alone. Thus, negotiations played a critical role in women asserting their agency and power during the arranged marriage process.

Further, the data illustrates that the women interviewed determined the content of their negotiations. Cultural and religious frameworks guided negotiations in both explicit and implicit ways. The explicit way can be observed by the content of negotiations. Women relied on and referred to their cultural and religious traditions to outline their negotiations and to provide explanations as to why they would like or not like something to be present during the marriage process and/or during the marriage itself. The implicit way is seen when locating where in the process negotiations between women and their rishtas occurred. The parents from both the men and women’s sides decided the time in which in-person meetings would occur and when certain decisions were to be made. The timing of decision-making was set by the cultural and religious frameworks. Meaning, parents followed culturally informed traditional timelines to make certain decisions. For example, it is culturally appropriate to present one’s daughter with a rishta and for her to confirm whether she wants to marry him before a baat pakki, a South Asian ceremony where the families come together to formally agree on the marriage. Thus, it is important for the parent who wishes their child to genuinely consent to the marriage that the two adult children converse and get to know one another so they can move on to the next stages of the process.

The data also highlights how class shaped the negotiations of women and the ways in which women’s perspectives on agency are situated within a liberal capitalist context. Further, their perspective of agency is, to some extent, in tension with the duties of family rather than embedded within duties of family. When asked why women did not have particular concern for mahr, the amount to be paid by the groom to the bride at the time of marriage, they all replied that they have their own money and will work (or were working during the time of the interview). Financial support from their husband through a mahr was not a concern because women had the means to provide such support for themselves. For example, Munaza stated that, “I didn’t really care about the mahr because I have a full time a job. I didn’t need anything.” Here, Munaza uses the word ‘need,’ to frame why mahr was not a concern. It was not a need for Munaza, thus not a concern. Further, Mariam shared, “I didn’t really care because I was working. I think if a woman is not educated and isn’t working, mahr is really important.” Zubia shared, “It really didn’t matter to me. I told him to look it up himself and do whatever he feels comfortable with doing.”

This is interesting because the Islamic jurisprudence in the Sunni[[12]](#footnote-12) tradition, mahr is a religiously ordained right women have and a mahr must be given to fulfill the Islamic requirements for marriage. Because women have direct access to their previously earned money and intended to earn money on their own when married, financial support through a mahr was not something women in this study felt needed to be focused on or ensured. This is further supported in Islamic jurisprudence as a wife has a right to financial support, or ‘maintenance,’ during her marriage to her husband (Baji & Pate, 2015). There is a stark difference between how women felt about traveling alone and working and mahr. Each woman brought up work and travel with their rishtas and asked if traveling and working would be something the rishta would be fine with in their marriage. It may be possible that because traveling, further education, and working are actions that require some form of interaction with their spouse, such as handing off car keys or using a shared bank account to purchase a flight, all the women explicitly stated they would like to travel, work, and go to school.

Conversations about mahr also point to a historical shift within the arranged marriage tradition that can be tied to the diasporic status of the women in the study. While mahr is an Islamic right and requirement within the Sunni tradition, the women in this study did not seek out their mahr amount in the same ways they sought out negotiations regarding traveling. Their work and education status assured the women that they would have some financial stability apart from their husband’s income. This brought a sense of stability and independence. The women perceive traveling alone, education, and working as things that point to their agency (and it does). Excluding mahr from their negotiations illustrates that to some extent, mahr is not an area in which women perceive their agency or, that mahr is not an area in which women wish to pursue their agency. It is possible this perception is informed by the liberal capitalist context in which they navigate as members of the diaspora. The notion of individualism linked to agency is often practiced in liberal feminist and capitalists’ contexts, where one finds their agency and power by detaching from one’s husband’s or family’s financial support. This then creates a tension with the duties of family because it shifts women away from a traditional system where women rely on their husbands, or a combined family, for financial support. As stated previously, arranged marriage and combined families are regarded in scholarship as an economic system, where women receive and provide support through monetary means and labor.

It is also important to note out where within the process women asked about traveling, working, and school versus when the discussion about mahr came up. The spousal support to travel alone, get an education, and work were brought up during the initial conversation's women had, when the majority of negotiations took place between women and their rishta. At that point of the process, women were recently introduced to their rishta, and they were beginning to learn more about one another. Conversations about women’s mahr amount occurred later in the process, after women agreed to marry their rishta (aside from Zubia) and were close to the nikkah (religious marriage ceremony). The difference of when each topic came up could possibly be because setting one’s mahr occurs towards the end of the process, where women and their rishta are set to be wed and are nearing the wedding date.

Conversations about mahr also reveal what women prioritize during negotiations, and how their priorities are connected to self-worth and self-realization. Past literature has illustrated that women engage in self-making processes during the arranged marriage process (Khan, 2015; Patel, 2017). By prioritizing traveling alone, education, and work during negotiations, women hint that part of their self-worth is connected to those things. There is a sense of agency, freedom, interest, and want woven into each of those activities for the women in this study. Because mahr was not a topic the women negotiated on, I believe that mahr is not a primary area in which women attach their self-worth to and thus, is not a primary area in which self-realization occurs for the women in this study. By working, by traveling alone, and by getting a formal education, women continuously delve into self-making. It is important for the women that they can continue to do so during their marriages. By negotiating for such things during the arranged marriage process, women also actively engage in the process of self-making.

During negotiations, women’s own constructions of their religious and cultural identities are front and center in conversations. It is also during negotiations where women take stock of what they value, who they are, and who they want to be. The women’s’ self-worth in this study is increasingly attached to self-realization through work and education and not the traditional responsibilities within the family. This creates a tension between women, their families, and culturally and religiously informed duties that women must navigate not only during the negotiation period of the marriage process but as married women too. This tension can partially be attributed to the Western diasporic context in which the women must navigate, where self-realization is connected to some of the tenets of American society such as work.

Further, women in this study illustrated the strategic decision to ask about the spousal support to travel, go to school, and work earlier on in the process to determine if they wished to pursue the rishta further. To bring up something such as mahr during the initial conversations is not generative as it does not inform women about what the rishta believes regarding women’s agency and power to pursue traveling alone, working, and going to school. Rather, because mahr is a religiously required part of the marriage process, it is already a promise that women are ensured. This promise combined with mahr’s connection to women’s self-realization orients mahr lower on the priority list of matters to negotiate. Further, the details of one’s mahr can be sorted out later but first women must decide if there is a wedding to even be had through their initial conversations, which now serves a dual purpose: to negotiate with and to vet the rishta.

Women explained in interviews how some men, whether in their life or as a generalization, did not like a working woman or a woman who travels alone. What this shows is that there is, to an extent, a belief within the sociocultural reality of the women in this study that women don’t need to be traveling, working, or going to school or it is not appropriate (or some combination of the two). Some men, in their life or generally, would actively hinder women from pursing such things. The decision to finalize and actualize women's desires to work, travel, and go to school in women’s lives after marriage are partly in the hands of their husbands, rather than wholly their own. This also scatters women’s power and agency across different parties other than themselves within the arranged marriage process and further complicates their navigation through the process and the marriage itself. The women in this study are aware of this scattered agency and power and navigate the negotiations with this in mind, ensuring that those topics and decisions about those topics are made early on in her conversations with her rishta. Further, all the women in this study initiated the conversations on those topics while their rishtas were asked about their opinion and what they would support their wife doing.

*1.3. Support Systems*

During the arranged marriage process and negotiations, women sought out support from people beyond their parents. These supports were often friends or extended family members. The women in this study all stated that they did not share emotional responses to the marriage process with their parents and only disclosed how they felt emotionally with their supports. The supports were chosen by the women and the relationship they maintained with their supports were within the bounds of what women wanted. For example, when sharing how she felt during some parts of the marriage process, Hania stated her “sister-in-law knew everything because she knows how I [Hania] really felt and knows about all the ups and downs and the doubts and uncertainties.” Further, Hania stated that she did not share anything regarding how she was feeling with her parents because her “parents didn’t know what I [Hania] was feeling and this was not because I [Hania] didn’t want them to know but because what I felt would not resonate with them [parents].”

For other women, supports provided emotional encouragement and assisted in negotiations between women and their parents. For example, Zubia shared that at one point, her rishta asked her if he could meet her without her parents present as he felt that Zubia was just “there to be there” and that he was “only getting to know her parents better.” It is important to state that Zubia’s rishta was not aware that she was being coerced to marry him. He was later informed by Zubia after they were married. Zubia’s support was an older cousin who had some rapport with her parents as she was considered an elder of Zubia and was married with children. Zubia shared hers and her rishta’s wish to spend time alone rather than with Zubia’s parents with her cousin.

When asked how she navigated the marriage process, Zubia shared, “I just did it. But I just dealt with [pause in Zubia’s speech] I think I fell forward into the wedding planning part and stopped thinking about actually getting married. I was just like, ‘Okay, I have to do this. I need to plan this.’ I didn't think about the fact that I was actually getting married.” Further, she shared, “Honestly, I was so unsure about even what was happening and how about much I could even tell them [parents] though, because I feel like a lot of it was masked by my anxiety and that did not let me think through things. I didn’t feel heard by my parents, that’s for sure.”

Zubia was not able to negotiate the terms of how she and her rishta to wanted meet because of the coerced nature of her marriage process. She sought out her older cousin to support her in navigating conversations with her parents. When Zubia informed her cousin, her cousin asked Zubia what she wished her cousin would tell her parents. Here, Zubia’s support acknowledged Zubia’s wants and confirmed them to ensure she heard Zubia. The cousin then approached Zubia’s parents, with whom the cousin had a good standing with. Zubia’s cousin negotiated new terms with her parents and later updated Zubia. Zubia was allowed to meet her rishta outside of her parents' home with her brother, whom Zubia is close with, as a chaperone. This, along with Hania’s story, highlights how the supports women sought out and maintained were elemental to the women’s experiences. Zubia shared that she never told her parents about wanting to see her rishta, but her parents knew her because of her cousin. Conversations with her parents about meeting the rishta without her parents happened after Zubia’s cousin negotiated.

Further, this illustrates the ways in which women navigated their scattered agency and power during the arrange marriage process. By creating a support system separate from their parents, women in this study could decide the terms of their support system and disclose things such as wants and emotional responses that they felt they could not share with parents. This is different than the marriage process they navigated as they were not positioned to lead decisions or to partake in all aspects of the process. In the support system, they lead all decisions and guided the support system where they felt they needed support. Thus, support systems enabled women to practice their agency and power to make decisions for themselves without having to include the desires of their parents or other elders. This strategy is seen in Zubia’s case. It is also important to position the support system within the arrange marriage process to better understand the ways in which support systems illustrate women’s practice of agency and power. For all the women in this study, the support system is anchored in the women’s desires, wants, and needs as women sought out the supports and maintained the terms of the support. The support systems diverge from the arranged marriage process as the system’s goals were not oriented towards the destination of a marriage, but rather centered on the women. This positionality of the support system can especially be observed in Hania’s case.

However, this is not to say that women within the arranged marriage process are never centered by elders or their desires; rather the support system acts as a supplement to the arranged marriage process. For example, Munaza shared that she felt like her parents “heard her and asked me [Munaza] if I felt good about how things were going.” Later in the interview, Munaza shared how she “told my [Munaza] parents that I [Munaza] like him and I left it like that. I told friends about the rishta and they were happy for me [Munaza]. I told my friends like ‘we did this, and then this, and we talked about that.’” Alia echoed this and stated that her parents often asked how she was doing, and she felt “like they were listening to what I [Alia] had to say.” When asked about if she told friends different things than she told her parents, she said, “I [Alia] told my friends what was going on because I [Alia] wanted to make the right decision.” Alia shared that she would give friends details that she would not share with her parents as it was “easier to just say it.” While some women in this study felt heard by their parents, they still created and sustained a support system to which they would turn to share details, emotional responses, and any other concerns women felt during the process.

*1.4. Event Planning & Preparations*

Women in the study, aside from Zubia, informed their parents they would like to marry their rishta. Some women made this decision within a month while others took a few months to make their decision. During those moments, women were conversing with their rishtas directly. At the same time, the parents were conversing with each other, getting to know one another as the arranged marriage process is a family wide affair (Aguiar, 2013). Once women confirmed with their parents that they wished to move forward, women’s positionality shifted again. This shift positioned women to be involved in event planning and preparations but not part of conversations parents had with another about what parents desired for each event, leading to making decisions that would manifest such desires. The women in this study all had some form of a baat pakki, nikkah, rukhsati, and valima.[[13]](#footnote-13) These events included cultural and religious ceremonies that were conducted according to cultural and religious traditions.

When planning for each of these ceremonies, women were actively involved in deciding décor, guest lists (to an extent), and their clothes (some women were gifted a wedding dress as per cultural traditions in parts of South Asia). Each woman was carrying a substantial portion of the responsibility to event plan and prepare for each ceremony. Women and parents both participated in planning for the events and deciding on the purchase of materials, such as clothes, table centers, and invitations. The women’s parents and the rishta’s parents spoke often about the details of the events and their desires for said details. Women were later informed of the needs and wants of the elders by their parents and how women must collaborate to manifest the desires of the elders via the material conditions of each event and what happens during the event. Women had to then contribute to the assurance that elder wants and needs would be present for each event. The things on which women and elders would decide also differed during the event planning process. Women were making some independent decisions for the events in terms of material conditions, such as color scheme and space set up. The schedule and traditions of the ceremonies, both cultural and religious, were decided entirely by elders. The layers of decision making regarding the events helped to adjust women from being the ones who built the space to being guided within the space according to cultural and religious traditions and ceremonial rituals.

Further, while women were constantly working towards the ceremonies and hearing about the needs of the elders from their parents, their future spouses were not even remotely as involved in the event planning. Women felt an imbalance in responsibility towards event preparation. Women were heavily involved, and men were often only updated on the event planning and preparation by their fiancé and parents. Men were not asked by elders to give their time to or be responsible for décor, color scheme, stage set-up, etc. Men’s participation in event planning was optional because as they were not expected by elders to partake, an expectation anchored in culturally informed gender roles. Women, on the other hand, had no choice of opting in or not, and were expected to participate regardless of if they wanted to help with event planning. While women were able to decide on some material conditions such as center pieces, their decision-making regarding events was tied to the elders deciding and expecting women to help.

In some cases, the rishtas were actively positioned closer to the decision-making core by the elders in ways women were not. This closeness to the elders enabled men to participate in decision making that woman were not “allowed” to partake in, such as setting the date for the nikkah as seen in Munaza’s case. Munaza stated that her rishta “was told to come sit with the elders,” during one of the family visits later on in the marriage process. When she went to sit with the elders too, she was told to “go away and sit with my [Munaza’s] sister.” When I asked why she thought she was not invited to sit with the elders but her rishta was, she shared “It’s because he’s a man, probably.” Another example of this closeness can be seen in Alia’s experience. Her rishta came to visit for the first time in person from California. The visit was for a few days. The first night, Alia’s rishta sat with her parents for hours. The content of their conversations was not made known to Alia. Alia saw her rishta for “not even fifteen minutes.” When asked about the content of their “not even” fifteen-minute conversation, Alia stated that they talked about “basic stuff, like how they are doing and how the flight was.” Her rishta spent the rest of his visit with her older siblings while she remained home. In both cases, men were given more proximity to and less restrictive passage within the decision-making core that was carried and sustained by the elders, contributing to the gendered experience for the women in the study.

*1.5. Conceptualizing Marriage Within Cultural and Religious Frameworks*

It is important to understand how marriage exists and maintains its existence within women’s sociocultural reality. This understanding helps to develop a more competent understanding of the ways in which the cultural and religious practices and traditions exist within the women’s arranged marriage experiences. While all women experienced an arrange marriage process, the ways in which they were exposed to the concept of marriage through their parents differed. All the women in this study were expected to get married by their parents. When women shared details on how their parents discussed marriage, they spoke of religious and cultural expectations. Hania shared that her parents would talk about marriage within "an Islamic perspective, like how it is sunnah to get married and all that stuff.” Further, Hania’s parents told her that a wife’s “responsibility is cooking and maintaining the house.” Munaza’s parents said that in marriage she should “respect my [Munaza] husband and he [husband] has this and that right in Islam. You have to be respectful of him.” In Zubia’s case, her parents told her that “you should get married before twenty-five. All girls should get married before twenty-five. That’s just how it is.” Within women’s sociocultural reality, marriage is a fundamental part of that reality and takes root in religious and cultural beliefs. Women also echo this belief. When asked what marriage means to them, Alia shared that “marriage is completing half your deen[[14]](#footnote-14).” Other women shared a similar sentiment.

When women shared the ways in which they came to the decision to marry their rishta, aside from Zubia, each woman shared they performed the isthikhara prayer, a prayer of guidance recited during times of indecision. The prayer played a significant role for women as they relied on the prayer to guide their decision making. Alia stated that she did isthikhara and that “if it’s [marriage to rishta] not good, it [the process] will stop but then it [the process] kept progressing.” Hania said she “did isthikhara when I first got the rishta and then I really leaned into the prayer after the first meeting.” Further, she shared that the “prayer helped me a lot and kind of process so I could try to figure out where I am and where am I going with this [the rishta].” She later brought up the isthikhara again and said she felt at “calm and at peace,” after doing the prayer and that it felt like she was “making the right decision” and that “isthikhara helped me find an answer.” Mariam also did isthikhara after her old Quran teacher suggested to her that she should perform the prayer. Mariam shared that “after doing some nights of isthikhara, I told my mom yes to marrying him [rishta].”

It is important to further contextualize the isthikhara prayer to grasp the significant role it played in decision-making for the women in this study. Within the cultural understanding of the prayer, someone who prays the isthikhara prayer may have a dream that shows some sign to signal to them on how to proceed in their decision. This signal can be a small detail in a dream, like an animal or show a glimpse of what life looks like if a particular decision is made. This cultural understanding is observed in Hania’s reflection of when she performed the prayer. She shared that she “didn’t see a dream or anything.” Further, dreams within the Islamic tradition are also considered as possibly providing a sign or guidance to the dreamer (Knysh, 2012). The importance of isthikhara is that isthikhara is part of women’s decision-making process. While family members often also pray the isthikhara prayer during the arranged marriage process, something that Hania’s and Alia’s parents did, women in this study pursued the prayer as well. This highlights how cultural and religious traditions that exist within women’s sociocultural reality assisted women in their decision-making process while women contributed to the reproduction of those traditions.

Further, the use of isthikhara prayer complicates the matter of choice. Women chose to perform the isthikhara prayer and seek out guidance. Women leaning into the prayer indicates that their decisions depended, to some extent, on their sense of what Allah wanted for them. Women’s choices also depended, to an extent, on what they thought their parents wanted for them. Women entertained the rishta and proceeded with the isthikhara prayer partially because their parents showed some interest in the rishta, hoping that their daughters would accept. Parents interests in rishtas can be confirmed by their sifting through biodatas and photos, partaking in several networks to find someone suitable for their daughters, and their facilitation of the arranged marriage process. This anchors women’s choices, their decisions, and their desires within a robust landscape that hosts the desires of their parents and in some ways, God’s (e.g., marriage being half of one’s deen).

Isthikhara prayer lends itself as a space for women to sift through the desires, demands, and expectations of God, parents, and their own. It’s a space where the coercive hum of parental demands is met with women’s religiously informed agency to explore the potential of a rishta during the arranged marriage process. The prayer is both a technology and spiritual space at once. Further, it is during the process of performing the isthikhara prayer and the later interpretations of dreams or feelings where coercion, consent, and women’s agency intertwine, creating experiences where the coercive hum of parental demands, desires, and expectations are not always experienced explicitly as coercion. Coercion and consent oppose one another as they actively intertwine. I believe this form of engagement between coercion and consent occurs because the arranged marriage process is structured and maintained by women’s parents, rather than wholly the women themselves. Parents and other elders maintain the decision-making core of the marriage process and structure the timeline of the process, which are culturally and religiously informed. Examples of this can be seen when women were pulled into the process after a series of decisions were already made at the biodata and photo stage and when women couldn’t opt out of event planning yet made independent decisions regarding things such as décor and color scheme.

When women make a choice guided by isthikhara, it is, to an extent, within the embrace of coercive elements (e.g., demands, desires, expectations). Women can make decisions, but within a process they have to be part of. Women navigate a marriage process that is conducted by their parents. The process is, to some extent, maintained through coercion, which takes the shape of demands, desires, and expectations. The process also has moments where women practice agency and consent, and make decisions that align with their wants, needs, and desires, The isthikhara prayer is not just a site where women seek guidance for their choices and nor is it just a way for women to include what they believe God wants for them, but simultaneously, the prayer becomes a possible tool for women to sift through and detangle from the desires of parents and God.

*1.6. Coercion & Consent Are Complicated*

The stories women shared throughout their interviews illustrates that consent is complicated in the lives of women. Throughout their story telling, women spoke explicitly about consent, particularly around the time of their nikkah. Zubia’s arranged marriage experience had the most robust engagement, explicitly and implicitly, with the concept and practice of (or lack of practice) consent as she was coerced to marry her rishta. Zubia shared that she informed her parents that she did not want to marry the rishta because it was “too soon.” Her parents replied with “that is not a good enough reason.” Zubia later shared that she “never” had a discussion about marrying her rishta with her parents and that she “felt that I [Zubia] knew the whole time,” that she would have to marry him. She also stated that she was involved in every single conversation that her parents had with other people, but not many conversations were directed towards her. Here, it can be observed that Zubia explicitly did not consent to the marriage while also feeling that she would have to go through with it due to the pressures she felt. This coercion illustrates one way in which Zubia experienced her consent being disregarded in an implicit way and explicit way.

Zubia shared that before her nikkah day, she met with the imam who would later facilitate her nikkah. Her parents were not present in the room and the imam asked her “you can tell me if you want to tell me anything.” When asked how Zubia replied to his statement, she stated that she did not confide in the imam but that he may have suspected something was amiss. When asked if her parents ever sat her down to tell her not to share the circumstances of her marriage to her rishta, she shared that “I am sure they [Zubia’s parents] expected that I didn’t go around telling everyone I was being forced to get married, but it wasn’t specifically like ‘don’t tell this person or don’t say this,’ because the expectations were already there that I shouldn’t say that.” Later in their conversation, Zubia informed the imam that she wants "every single right in Islam for women.”

While Zubia did not have a nikkahnama, a marriage contract that provides space for the wedding couple to write down their terms and conditions for the marriage, she did sign a certificate provided by the masjid. The imam told her that “by signing the certificate, everything in the Quran and Sunnah[[15]](#footnote-15) is yours [Zubia’s].” When asked who Zubia would like to accept the marriage during the official nikkah ceremony, Zubia stated that she would like to accept on her own behalf rather than her father, who is her wali, or guardian. During the nikkah ceremony, Zubia was dressed in traditional Bihari wedding clothes, surrounded by her mother, aunt, and other extended family members. The imam turned to Zubia to ask her if she accepts, and Zubia replied with “kabul hai,” translating to “yes, I accept.”

Zubia was strategic in obtaining her agency and power during the time of the nikkah. She strategically removed her father from accepting the nikkah on her behalf to assert her agency and power to verbally accept the nikkah. This further complicates her experience with consent as she verbally accepted a marriage she was coerced into. By informing the imam that she would accept on her own behalf and by verbally accepting, Zubia also shifted her positionality within the marriage process, something that up until the nikkah, was in the hands of her parents. This illustrates how Zubia practiced her agency and power within a religious arena, where her consent to marry is necessary according to Islamic jurisprudence (Al-Sharmani, 2018). The context in which Zubia shifted her positionality is important, as an imam is duty bound to obtain the consent of the bride and ask her if she wishes to verbally accept the nikkah herself or if she consents to her wali accepting on her behalf. The Islamic ruling on consent during one’s nikkah assisted Zubia in shifting her positionality without difficultly. This highlights the ways in which consent is part of Islamic tradition and how said tradition helps to create boundaries within which women’s consent is centered during the arranged marriage process, as seen in Zubia’s experience with the imam. Further, Zubia was aware of when in the process she would be able to assert her agency (during the nikkah) and where she would face challenges (enlisting her cousin to negotiate on her behalf to meet her rishta without her parents).

Zubia feeling coerced even though she accepted the nikkah points to how women experience coercion and consent in complex ways. The coercive nature of her marriage process is not negated by Zubia consenting to the nikkah. Rather, the coercive nature of Zubia’s marriage is maintained even with Zubia’s acceptance of the nikkah because consent, coercion, and agency are intertwined and can occur at the same time within her sociocultural reality, especially during the arranged marriage process. Consenting within a space where one is, to some extent, coerced to occupy through demands, desires, and expectations, still anchors one’s experiences with consent within coercive powers. This is not to undermine the agency, power, and consenting abilities of South Asian Muslim women, but rather to highlight that when women assert their agency and practice consent, they do so in a space with active forms of power that can, to an extent, withstand women’s opposing desires, wants, and needs. This is seen in Zubia’s case outside of her nikkah acceptance as well, where she independently made decisions on décor, her wedding outfit, and other details. She shared, “I knew I would have to help with organizing events. I also wanted specific things and I knew I would have to make those things happen.” Zubia’s case especially illustrates how in order for some of women’s wants, needs, and desires to manifest within the arranged marriage process, women have to partake in the process. Within her coerced marriage process, Zubia had to participate to ensure that the things she desired, such as décor and accepting her own nikkah, would happen.

The remaining four women in the study also had explicit conversations regarding consent with an imam. Before Munaza’s nikkah ceremony, her imam came to the room with her father to ask Munaza if she consented to her father, her wali, to accept the nikkah on her behalf. Munaza was wearing a traditionally colored red wedding dress and sitting with her cousins. She replied to the imam that she consents to her father accepting on her behalf. During the interview, Munaza shared that “the imam said that if it was forced, I [Munaza] can say no. I found that really nice.” Her father, the imam, her rishta, and his family sat in a different room than Munaza during her nikkah ceremony. Munaza’s mother came in with some state and masjid paperwork for her to sign after the ceremony was completed. Hania’s experience was a distinct experience of consent during the time of the nikkah. She shared that she signed a state marriage paper “in front of the imam. Signing the paper was kind of taken as consent.” The signing of the paper happened before her nikkah ceremony and so “that is why the verbal consent from the imam was not taken.” When asked to expand on why there was no verbal consent, Hania responded with “I mean because you are signing the paper, you are technically consenting. No one is forcing you to sign it, especially if you are like in front of someone.”

This sentiment is particularly interesting especially considering Zubia signing papers and verbally consenting during her nikkah ceremony, while her marriage to the rishta was coerced. Hania’s statement regarding how consent “technically” works further illustrates the complexity surrounding consent and coercion in the lives of the women in this study. The statement also illustrates that part of the complexity is anchored in women’s own conception of and experience with consent and coercion. As previously stated, Zubia’s experience with consenting further illustrates that coercion and consent can overlap and intertwine throughout the arranged marriage process. The two become paired because of forces, such as familial desires and conceptions of marriage, maintaining the decision-making core while the women being married must carry a large responsibility to ensure the planning and preparing for events, providing the space for women to partake in decision making. This is especially seen when Zubia decided on décor and color scheme for the events. Her decision-making on events were made within a coerced marriage process. The overlapping nature of consent and coercion is also seen when Zubia consented to her marriage during the nikkah, a nikkah that was the desire of her parents. She consented within a coerced landscape that she is in part expected to maintain through preparing and planning during later stages of the marriage process (e.g., mehndi, nikkah, shaadi, valima).

Turning to Mariam, her experience with consent illustrates the cultural framing of etiquette. Mariam’s father was initially informed about a rishta for Mariam by an extended family member, an elder who is her grandpa’s cousin. On the day of her nikkah, the elder was in attendance as well as was her extended family from Pakistan, including her uncle. Mariam sat in the women’s section of the two-story masjid, where she could peer down and observe her nikkah ceremony while she sat with women who were family and close friends. The imam asked her prior to the nikkah ceremony if she would like to accept on her own behalf or have her father, her wali, accept. She consented to her father accepting on her behalf. She shared “I really wanted my dad to give me away. It was really important to me.”

On the first floor of the masjid, Mariam’s father sat with the men of the family, including the elder who introduced Mariam’s rishta and her uncle from Pakistan. Mariam said that the “elder decided that my uncle from Pakistan would be my wali and give me away.” During the time to accept the nikkah on behalf of Mariam, her uncle accepted. Mariam, reflecting back to her nikkah ceremony, shared “After hearing my uncle accept, I thought ‘why did this happen though?’ It was not what I wanted.” When the imam came upstairs with paperwork, Mariam asked the imam “I did not give consent to my uncle to give me away. Is this Islamically fine?” The imam replied, “you gave consent to your dad who gave consent to your uncle so yes, you are married.” Mariam reflected in the interview and stated, “You can’t just pass my consent around.” She later added “Should I tell women to specify to their parents who is allowed to be their wali and only that person has consent?”

Mariam asked her father why her uncle accepted on her behalf. He replied saying that the family elder told him to let her uncle do it. Further, she shared that her father was “frustrated and he said that the family elder told him to let my uncle be wali. My dad did not know how to say no to my grandpa’s cousin [family elder].” The dynamic between Mariam’s father and the family elder illustrates how cultural etiquette informed her father’s decision to not reject the idea of making Mariam’s uncle her wali. Had he done so; he would have illustrated some level of protest to the desires of the elder. The decision led to Mariam’s consent to be in some ways circulated and passed between parties. This provides an example of the textured ways consent is experienced by women as a concept (e.g., consent is something that can be passed) and to how said concept manifests in women’s lives. Further, the interaction between Mariam’s father and the family elder further illustrates how the desires of elders help to guide the outcomes of decision-making and the coercive potential of desires, as illustrated in the earlier paragraphs of analysis.

Experiences with consent assist in further illuminating how agency and power of women are positioned within the marriage process. Consent is flexible and malleable in the stories shared by women. Similarly, women’s positionality was never stagnant during the arranged marriage process. The fluidity of how consent exists in the lives of the women in this study further supports that their agency and power was scattered across the arrange marriage process. And depending on what stage of the process in which women find themselves, they experience a varying degree of access to their agency and power or barriers (or both, as seen in Zubia’s own nikkah acceptance). What partially informs the varying degree of access or barriers women experience at particular stages includes cultural and religious traditions and frameworks as well as the desires of elders and how aligned said desires are with women’s own desires.

**VII.** **Conclusion**

This ethnography sought to understand how South Asian Muslim women within the diaspora negotiated during the arranged marriage process. My methodology allowed me to see the sequencing of the arranged marriage process, highlighting where power and agency show up within women’s narratives. By adapting Lila Abu-Lughod’s methodology of a practice as diagnostic of power, I found that negotiations were critical for women to discuss their desires and to assert their agency and power within a process that scatters their agency and power to varying degrees, depending on what stage of the process women are in. Women’s positionality shifted in accordance with the desires of their families and with cultural and religious traditions. Further, women maintained support systems that enabled them to assert their agency and power without having to consider or include the desires of their parents or other elders.

Negotiations composed of moment were women advocated for themselves, vetted their rishta, and participated in self-making. During negotiations, there is some tension between cultural and religious elements, such as mahr and familial duty, that can be linked to women’s diaspora status. The desires of women were shaped by women’s own understanding of their cultural and religious identities and through self-realization, where work, traveling, and education were areas where women found self-worth and sought to assert their agency. These areas point to a historical shift within diaspora populations, as women experienced their self-realization process within a liberal capitalist context and in accordance with capitalist tenets such as having a job. Simultaneously, women negotiated within cultural and religious boundaries, supporting past scholarship’s understanding of women as critical for cultural reproduction. Women partook in things such as isthikhara prayer, hijab, ceremonies, rituals, etc., during the arranged marriage process and felt attached to a variety of cultural and religious elements that constructed their sociocultural reality.

This thesis also revealed the complexities of coercion and consent and how the pair manifest in the lives of South Asian Muslim women. With coercion, consent, and agency tightly intertwined, women experienced a marriage process that maintained its structural integrity through parent’s demands, desires, and expectations. These demands, desires, and expectations require women to partake in the process, regardless of it they consent to the marriage or not. Because of this requirement, women sometimes experience coercion and consent in contradictory ways, where they can make decisions and assert their agency but within a process constructed by the demands, desires, and expectations of those other than themselves. Further, this thesis illustrates where in the marriage process women perceive they can exercise agency and consent, such as during the nikkah as seen in Zubia’s story. It would be beneficial to further study the complex dynamics between coercion and consent within the arranged marriage process as it would further reveal the various forms of power that exist in the lives of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora and how women perceive these various forms of power.

The data also illustrated the gendered experiences of arrange marriage. A future study focused on how South Asian Muslim men navigate the arranged marriage process would be generative as it would analyze the gendered experiences of men in South Asian Muslim culture as well supply some data to conduct a comparative study on how women and men experience the marriage process. Further, it would be interesting to learn how men who consented to the marriage felt when learning their now wife was forced into the union. This would shed more light on how forced arranged marriages are navigated within the marriage and how consent and coercion are perceived and manifest within marriages. In this study, interlocutors negotiated about work, education, and traveling alone. A future study centered on working class South Asian Muslim women would help to understand how class affects how women negotiate and how class impacts processes of self-making and self-realization. Such a study would help provide a comparative class analysis, something that would add texture to the current understanding about women and the arrange marriage processes.

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1. Mahr is one of the (pecuniary) rights of a wife established in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and on which there is consensus (*ijma'*) among Sunni Muslims. Sunni Muslims regard ijmā' as the third fundamental source of Sharia law, after the Qur'an, and the Sunnah. Not all sects or schools of Islam believe mahr is a necessary component of Islamic marriages. Due to all the interlocutors being Sunni Muslim, mahr was a necessary part of their marriage process. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rishta translates to ‘relationship’ in Urdu and Hindi. The rishta process refers families utilizing community ties, familial networks, and rishta aunties to spread information about their children throughout the community (at times, across the globe), while reading information about other children, in hopes of matching their child with someone else for marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Baat pakki translates to ‘it's final,’ and in many South Asian cultures, it is an unofficial engagement where both families to come together and formally agree to the relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nikkah, or marriage, is a legal and social contract between two individuals within the sharia (Islamic law). Shaadi translates to ‘wedding,’ is often used as a synonym for ‘marriage.’ For this study, shaadi refers to the wedding event and venue. Rukhsati translates to ‘sending off,’ and is a South Asian cultural practice that takes place when the groom and bride leave the wedding venue together with the elders of the groom’s family while the bride’s family walks the bride out. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hijabi is a colloquial term to refer to someone who wears a headscarf (which is often referred to as a hijab). Hijab is an Islamic standard of modesty observed by women. The standard includes covering one’s hair, chest, and body outline (hence loose clothing) in the presence of any non-mahram, men outside of the woman’s immediate family. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The spelling, sentence structure, and grammar has been taken directly from original group descriptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The WhatsApp group names have been changed to maintain group anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Google form link removed from description to maintain group anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Islam, dua (duʿā) refers to prayers of supplication and asking help or assistance from Allah. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ummah in Islam refers to the Muslim population as a unified community. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Biodata examples are from WhatsApp groups. All spelling, sentence structure, and grammar has been taken directly from the original text. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The women in the study identify as Sunni Muslim and thus, mahr is a required part of their marriage process. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Please refer to footnote 3 and 4 for definitions of baat pakki, nikkah, and rukhsati. Valima is a banquet or feast and is the second of the two traditional parts of an Islamic wedding and is performed after the nikah or marriage ceremony.  [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Deen (dīn) word refers to the way of life Muslims must adopt to comply with divine law, encompassing beliefs, character and deeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sunnah refers to the traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) that constitute a framework for Muslims to follow. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)