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Transnationalism, social capital and gender – young Pakistani Muslim women in Bradford, UK

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Abstract

This article considers the relationship between transnationalism and social capital amongst young Pakistani Muslim women in Bradford, West Yorkshire. The central aim of the article is to explore how second generation Pakistani Muslim women accrue faith based social capital to negotiate and resist transnational gendered expectations, norms and practices. In particular, they use faith-based social capital that is transnationally informed: to challenge the patriarchal expectations and norms of their families; to gain access to higher/further education and thereby improve their life opportunities; and to resist growing anti-Muslim sentiment. This paper draws on qualitative research (in-depth interviews) conducted in Bradford.

Keywords: Bradford; gender; Muslim; social capital; transnationalism.

Introduction

In January 2016, the Conservative party government in the UK announced a new initiative for Muslim women to learn English, so they would become a moderating force and act as vocal opponents of radical *Imams* in their community. The initiative was seen as a response to concerns amongst politicians and policy-makers that young Muslim men become radicalised because of 'the traditional submissiveness of Muslim women', as Prime Minister David Cameron put it.[1] The initiative came under intense criticism from Muslim women's groups, who saw it as reproducing problematic narratives about Muslim women as passive, voiceless victims. They took to *Twitter* (♯traditionallysubmissive) to highlight their achievements, voice and agency. This was not the first time that Muslim women became objects of intervention at the behest of UK politicians (Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2012). Concerns with the supposed helplessness and lack of agency of Pakistani Muslim women in the face of an overly burdensome transnational patriarchal culture has become a key focus in political and policy circles in the UK, particularly in terms of

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[1] David Cameron (2016): "More Muslim women should 'learn English' to help tackle extremism". *The Telegraph,* 17 January 2016.

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how it links with the securitisation (i.e. anti-terror) agenda. As Razak (2008: 4) argues, 'while Muslim men have been the target of an intense policing, Muslim women have been singled out as needing protection from their violent and hyper-patriarchal men'. At the same time, the British government has developed a strategy for Muslim women to advise ministers on matters relating to counter-terrorism and radicalization, because they are seen to embody a 'safer' and more 'liberal' Islam (Brown, 2008; Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2012).

The focus of this article is to explore how young second-generation Pakistani Muslim women accrue faith-based social capital to negotiate transnational gendered expectations, norms and practices, whilst resisting growing discrimination and prejudice. The aim is to illustrate how young women are not passive, docile victims of patriarchal expectations and external hostilities; rather, they often confront such challenges by turning to their faith and using it to counter negative stereotypes and discrimination peacefully. Macey (1999, 2002) argues that this is often in sharp contrast to their male counterparts, some of whom have decided to tread the fine line between legal/illegal activities and radical Islam.[2]

The article is based on interview-based research conducted by the first author, with young Pakistani Muslim men and women) in four predominantly Pakistani Muslim neighbourhoods in Bradford's inner city (Manningham, Girlington, Heaton-Oak Lane, and West Bowling) (McLoughlin, 2006). We adopted a snowballing technique to recruit respondents. During July 2004 and May 2005, a total of 54 interviews were conducted: 29 females and 25 males. The British-born respondents were aged between 16 and 20 years of age and were recruited from schools, youth clubs, the university and colleges. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using Atlas-ti software, in a grounded theory approach. We used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of our respondents (for an in-depth methodological discussion, see Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2008). In this article, we focus on the women respondents only as our data supports and builds on a growing body of literature that illustrates how Muslim immigrant women are exercising agency by reclaiming their religious traditions through embodied and knowledge-based piety (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore, 2003; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006).

Gendering Social Capital and Transnationalism

The concept of 'social capital' has empirical and theoretical utility for understanding how the creation of specific networks and relationships of trust and reciprocity can, *inter alia*, facilitate upward socio-economic mobility, contribute to community development, increase educational attainment, strengthen democracy and ensure community cohesion (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam,

[2] It is, of course, important to mention that women often take up arms when they face constant threats to their ethnic, religious or political identities. In such cases, it is the threats rather than grievances rooted in gender that are foregrounded (such as women's brigade within ISIS).

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1995, 2001). Feminists have focused on the gender differences in the distribution, nature and mobilization of social capital. First, a gendered analysis of social capital illustrates how it is 'imbued with gender inequalities and gendered hierarchies' (Van Staveren, 2002: 22) which can potentially affect the accumulation and investment of social capital. Thus gender inequality can often translate into inequality in the accumulation of social and human capital that may contribute to existing social and economic disparities. Second, there are significant differences in the social networks and embedded resources between women and men. Women's networks are smaller, informal, more homogeneous (in respect of sex, age, education and income), and larger in terms of kin. Lowndes (2006: 234) suggests that women's social capital differs because it is embedded in 'networks of informal sociability'. While women tend to belong to community based associations that are principally related to kinship ties, 'care' activities, and the domestic sphere, men tend to be located in formal organisations which are large and related to economic activities (Gidengil and O'Neill, 2006: 5, 264; Foley and Edwards, 1999: 146; Lowndes 2006: 234; Moore, 1990: 727; Morrow, 2006). Third, the private sphere as a site for building social capital is neglected; and traditional institutions such as 'the family' are treated normatively, even though they are frequently sites of power and contestation (Gidengil and O'Neill, 2006; Lowndes, 2006; Morrow, 1999, 2001, 2006). This can be attributed to the continued relevance of the public/private dichotomy, which underestimates the relevance of the domestic economy for community development.

We argue that it is problematic to assume that women's social capital is less significant because of the structural disadvantages that they often encounter, relative to men. Gender inequality does not negate the capacity to build social capital; rather social capital is built through and in other networks. Often, women build and mobilise collective resources away from the conventional gaze of theorists like Putnam (1995, 2001), particularly within the home and local community (Stolle and Micheletti, 2006; Thapar-Björkert and Sanghera, 2010). Yet, it would be incorrect to assume that all women have access to the same kind of social capital, as it is likely to be influenced by the intersectional axes of class, generation, race/ethnicity, religion and sexuality.

A largely US-based literature explores how various ethnic groups mobilise collective resources (family, kinship and community) to overcome particular disadvantages. Bankston and Zhou (2002: 286) examine 'ethnicity as a resource' and define social capital 'to not only include the resources held by individuals or groups but also as "processes" of social interaction leading to constructive outcomes'.[3] The relationship between families and the community (local and transnational) is understood to be cyclical. The community is an important vehicle

[3] For example, overcoming limited human and economic capital among first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in the US is explained by the social capital of their 'intact families' (Bankston and Zhou, 2002).

for reinforcing various norms, beliefs and values (e.g. education and hard work) transmitted by the family, and vice versa (also see Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1992). Another feature of family/community-based social capital is that built on religion or faith (Furbey et al., 2006; Smidt, 2003). Religious-based social capital has also been viewed suspiciously. Hopkins warns that '[a]n unfortunate impediment to analysing faith identities and how they contribute to the production of social capital is a tendency to regard religion as irrational and as therefore inherently problematic' – especially Islam and Muslims (Hopkins 2011: 530).

Social capital has also been used to explore contemporary processes of transnationalism, for example the emergence of transnational families that have been understood discursively, such as in the sense of de-territorialised solidarity between a group of strangers of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), or materially, whereby goods, funds and opportunities flow in and through transnational circuits (Kivisto, 2001). Contrary to the argument that mobility will deplete conventional stocks of social capital (Coleman, 1988), new forms of social capital are re-established (Ballard, 2003; Goulbourne, 2002; Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 2001) through social networks to facilitate and sustain family relationships across national borders (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Goulbourne and Chamberlain, 2001; Portes et al., 1999; Zontini, 2010). Social capital is pivotal in the decision to migrate, to facilitate settlement and the acquisition of information and resources in the new country, and can be readily mobilised within transnational family networks in times of need, for instance economic hardship (Ballard, 2003; Voigt-Graf, 2004). Whilst immigrants are not tied to localised communities, kin and ethnic ties that are sustained through trust, reciprocity and solidarity continue to play a central role in processes of migration and settlement. Landolt (2001: 217) describes how norms and practices come to exist through 'circuits of transnational obligations and interests'.[4] Often transnational marriage plays a key role in the processes described by Landolt (2001) and Vertovec (2004), especially in extending a family's kinship network and collective upward mobility.

Women are pivotal in building and sustaining transnational networks. Some women use their networks to cultivate kinship ties in multiple locations and across national borders. These kinds of networks are double edged: on the one hand, they can be important sources of symbolic and emotional capital whilst, on the other hand, they can reproduce particular gendered relations of power (e g. arranged marriage, male-child preference). These relationships are easily maintained through advancements in communications and technology, and their relative affordability have meant that the world 'out there' and the 'homeland' (e.g. kin, faith/religion and ethnicity networks) are closer than ever before for transnational families. People's everyday lives are conditioned in terms of expectations (e.g.

[4] Similarly, Vertovec (2004: 17) highlights how: "[f]or many individuals, families and communities in both sending and receiving contexts, transnational patterns of everyday activity, communication and exchange become embedded in a kind of transnational moral economy of kin."

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work, education, marriage and life course), moral economy of kin (e.g. providing support and guidance to kin based on trust and reciprocity), and institutional structures (e.g. how to organise or participate in religious/ethnic community and local association). Significantly, it has meant that kin-based networks, relationships of trust and reciprocity are more easily sustained across space, while gendered, religious and cultural expectations, norms, values and practices are transmitted inter-generationally.

Bradford

This article draws on empirical data collected in the city of Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK, where a number of national and international controversies have resulted in the increasing visibility of the Pakistani Muslim community. These include: the rise of right-wing politics during the 1970s and 1980s; the Honeyford affair (1980s) concerning the perceived racist remarks by a head teacher on the lack of social integration and adherence to cultural, religious and ethnic identities amongst local Pakistanis; and publication of Salman Rushdie's book, *Satanic Verses,* in 1998. The reaction of the Muslim community to the perceived blasphemous portrayal of revered Islamic figures started in Bradford, as did the urban disturbances of 1995 and 2001 when, for the first time, the protagonists were predominantly young Pakistani Muslim men (Burlet and Reid, 1998; Macey, 2002, 1999). Young women, for the most part, were not directly involved in these disturbances.

Young Women – Change and Resistance

The young women in our research talked about how the migratory and transnational experiences and practices of their parents informed their relationships with them, with their family in Pakistan, and with the larger society.[5] Parents often relied upon narratives of their 'loss', 'sacrifice' and 'hardship' when they arrived in the UK in order to instil particular norms and values in young people (e.g. the need to respect their elders, and arranged marriage to first cousins). This explained how and why gendered expectations were often reproduced inter-generationally. Young women were expected to take on the traditional role of a dutiful wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Family honour (*izzat*), which is closely tied to patrilineal decent group (*biraderi*), remained a central tenet of transnational families. Young women, in particular, were expected to respect and adhere to it. Failure to do so often resulted in being shunned by the family and community, forced into an arranged marriage or, in some extreme cases, subjected to violence

[5] According to Yeoh et al. (2005: 308): "[t]he transnational family as a formation derives its lived reality not only from material bonds of collective welfare among physically dispersed members but also a shared imaginary of 'belonging', which transcends particular periods and places to encompass past trajectories and future continuities."

and even murder (i.e. honour-based-violence) (Werbner, 2007; Meetoo and Mirza, 2007).[6]

Our research found that young women demonstrated agency via a religious rather than ethnic identity because they saw religion to be more empowering than their culture and cultural identity. Rather than being a source of oppression and exclusion (Hopkins, 2011), religion for these women was a resource to be mobilised against what Ali (1992: 115) describes as a 'northern conservatism' in northern English cities, where an overbearing Pakistani patriarchal masculine culture suppresses Pakistani women. As we have argued elsewhere (Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2007), unlike some of their male counterparts who were associated with deviant masculinities, the disturbances, 'gang culture', underachievement (e.g. education and economic) (Macey, 1999, 2002), young women used their faith identity to negotiate, challenge and transform transnational gendered norms and expectations, on the one hand and, on the other, to counter growing anti-Muslim hostility. Indeed, 'religious cultural capital' (Ramji, 2007: 1181) became an important tool for personal betterment, particularly through education, for many young Muslim women.

The respondents built this religious capital with like-minded women (and men) whom they met at Islamic conferences, book readings, prayer sessions or school/college/university. For many of the young women, such networks and associations constituted a religious community that provided 'safe spaces' where they could share their ideas and learn more about their faith. Indeed, it was an outlet where they could air their frustrations and seek solace. Often such interactions took place at university or college and in Muslim associations. The respondents also arranged Quran recitation sessions and social evenings where they would discuss their faith in greater detail. They also discussed more contentious issues such as the media and political demonization of Islam, and how they ought to respond to this as individuals. Many held the view that they each had a responsibility not to besmirch Islam through their daily interactions with non-Muslims, even in the face of growing hostility.

Transnational linkages were also established via particular chat-rooms on the Internet and/or sharing their ideas about their personal faith journey with Islamic bloggers. This virtual community was seen to be more progressive and valuable in, for example, emphasising the Islamic perspective about the importance of education. Some young women contrasted this Islamic interpretation with cultural understandings of education, which are often gendered. Such linkages were a source of inspiration and support for many of the young women in negotiating and

[6] Recently, Naz Shah (2016), Minister of Parliament for Bradford West, which includes Manningham, reiterated, 'we do have patriarchal pockets in our communities which won't and don't support women going out and being confident and partaking in civil society because they want that patriarchal structure to continue'. *The Guardian*, 18 January 2016.

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challenging transnational cultural practices whilst bringing about positive change in Bradford.

Thus, women drew on religion to develop strategies to challenge their families' cultural expectations and practices. Central to the women's strategy was the de-coupling of faith from cultural beliefs and practices. These women were often critical of the fact that their parents had a limited or very literal understanding of the Islam, and were therefore ignorant about how, for example, certain traditional cultural practices were mistaken for religious norms. An example was higher or further education and careers for women. Many young women reiterated the value of education from a religious perspective. For example, one female respondent, Sara (aged 17), talked about how education and educating oneself is absolutely central to Islam:

> *What I have learnt from my religion is that you need to educate yourself if you want to achieve anything. What I found is that people who are more religious have gone further in education so there is a kind of correlation between people's religious kind of spirituality and their achievement.*[7]

Often, gaining access to higher/further education entailed building relationships of trust with parents. Young women were critical of how their parents still held onto gendered cultural expectations about female education that were no longer relevant in Pakistan. Indeed, there was a sense that their parents were out of touch with the changes that had taken place in Pakistan and they were holding onto an image that no longer existed. They were also critical of how their parents' judgement was always informed by worst-case scenarios (e.g. that the daughter would elope or be enticed into Western ways such as drinking and smoking, and bring shame and dishonour to the family). Indeed, whilst many parents appreciated the importance of education, they often opposed the values that education promoted, such as individuality, public freedom, and greater autonomy. A number of female respondents spoke anecdotally about female friends who were removed, by their parents from their schools just before they were about to sit for their final exams and taken back to Pakistan to be married. In some instances, this went against the key goal of transnational family strategy to enhance 'social, cultural and symbolic capital' through education (Waters, 2005; Yeoh et al., 2005: 312).

One way in which some of the women sought to build this trust was by demonstrating and enacting their piety more obviously, for example, wearing the *hijab* (headscarf), which then counterpoised them with their supposedly less religious, non-*hijab* wearing female counterparts, who were looked upon with greater suspicion by parents, when out in public and away from the scrutiny of their family. Ali (1992: 114) in her research on faith and ethnicity amongst Muslim women in north England found that 'the good Muslim girl who shows unusual devotion to her faith may find it possible to express a desire for higher education

[7] Interview conducted on July 20, 2004.

or professional employment without risking her position'. Sara, the respondent whom we mentioned earlier, was considered very religious by her parents because she wore the *hijab*, prayed five times a day and was planning a pilgrimage to Mecca. For Sara such practices were important for building trust with her parents, so that they would allow her to go onto study at university. In discussing how cultural practices within the community can be barriers to women's educational aspirations, Sara said:

> *I think that as long as it is Islamically okay to do a certain thing, even if the whole community was against it, I will do it because the community is not always right.*[8]

Sara's close friend, Laila (aged 17), spoke about the importance of faith and education, and the cultural burdens of patriarchy:

> *Learning that knowledge is light [...] comes from faith. I would like to clarify that in terms of an Islamic point of view, you get a country like Afghanistan where women are not being educated which is not Islamic at all. I would class [i.e. categorise] that and see that as patriarchy and that it is totally cultural.*[9]

Faith-based social capital also served another purpose. In the face of growing anti-Muslim sentiment, the young women relied on their faith-based networks for support. The fear of anti-Muslim reprisals after 9/11 had deep reverberations within Muslim communities. For instance, Nabila (aged 17) talked about the growing hostility towards Muslims since 9/11 and her frustration in challenging it:

> *It's giving them [Muslims] a bad name case even if he [Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda] for the good or something, he's done it for the worse because it's gone off [backfired] on us and not him. I didn't tell him to go and do it [attack the Twin towers in New York], it's not my fault I'm Muslim, it's just him and his own fault.*[10]

A common theme that we encountered during the research was the question of whether women should wear the *hijab*, particularly as it made it easier for the women to be singled out as Muslim and thus a target of discrimination and prejudice. For example, Sara said:

> *I think it's [hostility towards Muslims] getting worse... because of the media... and you have got the BNP [far-right British National Party] kicking in as well... now my clothing [referring to her hijab] ...I get asked questions and funny looks that maybe I wouldn't have got three or five years back... things are not working for Muslims in the media and in politics... now it's*

[8] Interview conducted on July 20, 2004.
[9] Interview conducted on August 6, 2005.
[10] Interview conducted on September 7, 2005.

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> *heightened [hostility towards Muslims], it's working more against Muslims.*[11]

In discussing how Islam influences her life and the significance of wearing a *hijab*, Iffat (age 19) stated that 'it's like identification, that, "Ok, I'm Muslim" – you feel protected'. Many of the women gained support from their faith-based networks when they encountered hostility for wearing the *hijab* or for being Muslim. For example, Anika (aged 18) discussed how:

> *For me and my friends wearing the hijab means that we identify with each other... we're sisters and support one another... when you face trouble, you know, like racism, abuse, being called names... Just being with likeminded people, people who understand and share what you believe in [i.e. faith] and experience helps lots.*[12]

Indeed, it was often because of this support network that women were able to encourage other women who were unsure about the responses that they may encounter when they decided to wear the *hijab*. But wearing the *hijab* also marked people as different, as 'Outsiders', and with suspicion. In recalling a trip to Italy in 2004, Iffat (age 19) discussed how 'times have changed' and that Muslims and Islam have become 'public enemy number one'. Iffat and her sister were stopped by policemen because as she says:

> *I was wearing a headscarf and they asked, 'Where are your documents?' They just said it to me, not my sister because she doesn't wear a scarf, so I was like, 'We're British, we're from Britain', he then just shut up and walked off.*[13]

In this case, Iffat was aware of the potential problems associated with her faith identity and instead chose to foreground her national identity. Parents were often less religious than their daughters and had reservations about their wearing the *hijab*:

> *My mother because of all this terrorism she was watching on the news, she said, 'Iffat I fear for your life so take it off'...and my father would say, 'Oh there's no need to wear it, it's ok you know.*[14]

Despite these concerns, many young women decided to continue wearing the *hijab*. Indeed, the strength and resilience to wear the hijab came from other women who were also wearing one.

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[11] Interview conducted on September 8, 2005.
[12] Interview conducted on August 16, 2005.
[13] Interview conducted on October 5, 2005.
[14] Interview conducted on October 7, 2005.

Conclusion

In recent times, the supposed lack of agency of Pakistani Muslim women has become a political concern in the UK, particularly with increasing securitisation. This article challenges assumptions around such concern. Our analyses emphasise three points. First, we problematise culturally bound stereotypes by examining the ways in which young women navigate their everyday transnational lives in Bradford. Young women resist transnational patriarchal expectations, values and practices, by developing coping strategies that centre on faith-based social capital – faith becomes a resource. These women understand 'being Muslim' as a source of strength, solace, and security in terms of negotiating (albeit subtly), on the one hand, relations and structures of power within their own communities and, on the other hand, increasing discrimination and hostility externally. Second, we also highlight that unequal gendered power relations do not undermine the capacity to build social capital-including faith-based capital. Instead, we have argued that faith based capital is mobilized by women to: negotiate both the public and the private; advance educationally; and challenge the misconceptions of the supposed incompatibility between gender equality and Islam. Despite experiencing 'northern conservatism' and patriarchy within predominantly the private sphere and discrimination in the public sphere, the young women in this study mobilized faith-based capital to negotiate these obstacles. Third, with advances in affordable telecommunications, transnationalism enables women to connect with and build relationships with likeminded religious peers around the globe, which can be an important source of support at a time of growing hostility and discrimination. In doing so, they challenge media and political stereotypes of Muslim women and exercise their agency through their networks.

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