



Islamic Education and Gender Justice: A Study of Child Engagement in the Pakistani Diaspora

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Abstract

There is a continuing practice of childhood engagements in which marriages are arranged at a young age, a long-standing tradition among many Pakistani families that serves to maintain kinship ties. This research paper examines the impact of migration and modernization on the practice of arranged marriages among Pakistani diaspora communities, particularly in relation to children's access to education, including Islamic religious education. These families must balance traditional values with those of the host countries, which prioritize individual rights, gender equality, and legal obligations concerning education before marriage. A qualitative research design was applied using a multiple case study methodology. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten diaspora families, case studies in Pakistan, and secondary sources such as legal documents, sociological studies, and community reports. Data analysis was conducted thematically to explore how families adapted child engagement practices to host-country laws, social norms, and cultural expectations. The findings show that engagement still plays an important role as a marker of cultural continuity but has undergone significant transformation; i) marriages are postponed until legal and educational requirements, including religious education, are fulfilled; ii) there has been a shift toward a model in which individuals marry based on mutual consent; and iii) intergenerational conflicts arise when children prefer to continue their education rather than marry young. These results confirm that education, economic independence, and the value of equality in Islam are important factors in restructuring traditional practices. Thus, child engagement has not disappeared entirely but has been adapted into a more flexible pattern, allowing diaspora families to remain connected to their cultural heritage while ensuring children's rights to Islamic education and personal autonomy in modern society.

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INTRODUCTION

Fixed childhood engagements, where marriages are pre-arranged in early childhood, are a deeply rooted practice within Pakistani culture. Traditionally, such engagements are viewed as a means to safeguard family honor, preserve kinship ties, and strengthen alliances across extended family networks. In many cases, these practices also coexist with expectations of cousin marriages and lineage continuity,

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giving them both cultural and symbolic value within the community (Qureshi, 2022). By binding children into marital commitments at an early age, families not only preserve heritage but also ensure the stability of social relations across generations.

However, migration to Western countries such as the United Kingdom has exposed Pakistani families to new socio-cultural environments that foreground personal autonomy, gender equality, and the right of individuals to choose their life partners. Within these host societies, two theoretical lenses help explain the shifting dynamics of fixed engagements. Acculturation theory describes how migrants negotiate between retaining cultural traditions and adopting host-country norms, with outcomes ranging from assimilation to hybrid forms of integration (Shaw, 2014). Modernization theory further suggests that factors such as education, urbanization, and economic independence contribute to the erosion of traditional practices and the rise of delayed marriage and partner choice. These perspectives are particularly relevant for second-generation migrants, who, immersed in host-country norms, often resist early or pre-arranged engagements.

The legal framework of the United Kingdom adds another layer of complexity. Forced marriage is criminalized, and instruments such as Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs) provide a socio-legal shield against coercion. These regulations not only prohibit underage and non-consensual unions but also create pressure on diaspora families to delay or modify fixed engagements. In practice, this has led to a gradual shift away from rigid parental decision-making toward models that emphasize mutual consent and compliance with legal norms.

Despite the growing body of literature on arranged marriages, forced marriages, and transnational family strategies, limited scholarship specifically addresses how fixed childhood engagements distinct from other forms of arranged marriages are transformed within the Pakistani diaspora in (Mu & Yeung, 2021). Previous studies have largely concentrated on legal responses, demographic patterns in co-ethnic marriages, or the health and wellbeing of young people. Few, however, combine qualitative accounts of childhood betrothals with analysis of the socio-legal and cultural forces that reshape them (Gill & Harvey, 2017). This gap underscores the need for deeper inquiry into how families adapt such long-standing traditions under conditions of migration and modernization.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the ways fixed childhood engagements are not only declining but also being restructured within the Pakistani diaspora in the United Kingdom. The analysis focuses on adaptation models such as postponing marriage until legal or educational requirements are fulfilled, as well as shifting toward consent-based arrangements where both partners agree to marry. In doing so, this research highlights the resilience and adaptability of cultural practices under migration and modernization, reversing the narrative of erosion toward one of transformation. Ultimately, it demonstrates how diaspora families negotiate a triangular space between tradition, cultural heritage, and the socio-legal realities of their host society, balancing the preservation of cultural rootedness with the demands of new and markedly different social contexts (Arnot & Naveed, 2014; Yeung & Mu, 2020).

At the same time, it is important to consider how these practices intersect with children's right to education, particularly Islamic education. Early engagements often place restrictions on girls' opportunities to continue schooling, despite the Islamic principle that seeking knowledge is obligatory for both men and women (Bodnar, 2019; Hussain, 2024; Kanwal & Aslam, 2018). This tension reveals a gendered impact, where young women are disproportionately disadvantaged by cultural

expectations of marriage at the expense of education. By situating the study within the framework of Islamic education and gender justice, this research underscores the importance of protecting children's rights to learn, grow, and develop religious and social knowledge before entering marriage. In this way, the transformation of fixed childhood engagements in the diaspora is not only a cultural and legal issue but also a matter of educational equity and alignment with Islamic values of justice and knowledge (Carey & Ali, 2021; Phillips et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2018).

METHODS

The study was based on a qualitative research with a phenomenological focus because it aims at discovering the lived experiences of the Pakistani diaspora families and how they mediate fixed childhood engagements in the United Kingdom socio-legal framework. The phenomenological method is suited since it enables the study to capture the perspectives, meanings, and subjective perception of the cultural practices by the participants which are changing (Adel & Anoraga, 2023; Ardinigrum et al., 2021; Eddles-hirsch, 2015).

The sources of data were 10 Pakistani family Diasporas living in the UK. The sampling of families took a purposive type to allow diversity in terms of generational (first- and second-generation migrants), socio-economic status, and duration of stay. This gave a wide range of experiences on the perception and adaptation of fixed childhood engagements. Methods of data collection were in-depth semi-structured interviews with family members, as well as the analysis of the available secondary sources (legal documents e.g., UK Forced Marriage Protection Orders, statutory guidance), and community reports that covered marriage practices among the South Asian diaspora communities (Baumeister & Carabine, 2024). Interviews were done in English, Urdu, or Punjabi based on the choice of the participants, and each interview lasted between 60–90 minutes.

To analyze the data, the research utilized thematic analysis in accordance with the six-step model of Braun and Clarke (2006). NVivo software was used to code and develop themes to systematize the data. This procedure helped in identifying common trends, including postponed marriages, consent-based changes, and conflicts between generations, as well as differences among families (Cernasev & Axon, 2023; Labra et al., 2020; Naeem et al., 2023). Ethics in research were well taken into consideration. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw whenever they deemed it necessary. To ensure privacy, pseudonyms were used, and any identifying information was removed during transcription. Data collection was preceded by ethical clearance from the institutional review board of the study.

In addition, this phenomenological approach provides space to explore how education particularly Islamic education shapes the participants' understanding of gender equality, family responsibility, and children's rights within the context of early engagements. This allows the study to move beyond cultural adaptation and to consider how Islamic educational values, such as the obligation to seek knowledge and uphold justice, influence intergenerational perspectives and decision-making in the diaspora. By doing so, the methodology aligns with the broader framework of Islamic education that promotes both learning and gender equity as essential elements of family and social development (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019; Tuffour, 2017).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research demonstrate that there are three general trends in the response of Pakistani diaspora families in the United Kingdom to the tradition of fixed childhood engagements: resistance, adaptation, and model change. The younger generations, and women in particular, were especially rebellious and opposed the early advances on the level of education, independence, and suitability. As an example, the pre-arranged marriages were frequently turned down by daughters, which led to long-term conflict between generations in families. In reaction, there were strategies of adaptation to this situation by many families, finding compromise by delaying engagements until after higher education or renegotiating engagements when children were already adults. In the course of time, certain families shifted to outright transformation of the model and no fixed engagements were maintained but rather replaced by flexible ones where mutual consent, delaying unions or even tolerating intermarriage was done. In all situations, these were determined by four factors, namely, education, economic independence, legal limitations to underage marriage, and exposure to host-society ideals of gender equality (Krstinić et al., 2024).

The stories of ten Pakistani diaspora families in the UK indicate recurring themes in the adaptation of fixed childhood engagements. One dominant pattern was the tension between tradition and personal autonomy. Younger generations tended to reject early marital commitments, prioritizing education, compatibility, and independence (Iqbal et al., 2022; Manzoor et al., 2018). For instance, daughters often resisted early engagements arranged by their parents, leading to family conflicts but also eventual negotiation. Intergenerational dialogue emerged as a key adaptation strategy, with many parents gradually recognizing the need to include their children's voices in marital decisions (Khan, 2023).

To ensure anonymity and maintain research ethics, each family is identified using a code (K1–K10) instead of real names. These codes correspond to ten different family cases representing a range of generational, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds within the Pakistani diaspora in the UK.

Table 1. Family Narratives of Adaptation to Fixed Childhood Engagements

Code	Location	Initial Practice (Fixed Engagement)	Conflict/Tension	Form of Adaptation	Outcome
K1	Birmingham	Daughter engaged at 5 for kinship ties	Daughter resisted; wanted education and autonomy	Delay model; allowed choice later	Daughter chose her own partner
K2	Manchester	Son engaged at 8	Tension over satisfaction vs. tradition	Renegotiated at 21; compromise with parents	Son chose partner with parental consultation
K3	London	Daughter engaged at 6 to cousin in Pakistan	Daughter refused; prioritized education	Engagement dissolved	Daughter married partner of choice
K4	Glasgow	Daughters pre-engaged	Parents questioned value of tradition	Abandoned fixed engagements	Both daughters married partners of choice
K5	Leicester	Son engaged at 10	Son unhappy; pressure of tradition	Engagement dissolved	Son married partner of choice
K6	Bradford	Daughter engaged at 7	Daughter refused; sought compatibility	Parents sided with daughter	Daughter married

					chosen partner
K7	London	Early discussions of engagements	Anticipated conflict	Involved children in decision-making	Balanced cultural values + autonomy
K8	Manchester	Early discussions of engagements	Son engaged underage	Engagement cancelled; shifted to consent model	Support for mutual consent
K9	Leeds	Daughter's engagement planned early	Daughter wanted higher education	Engagement postponed	Daughter married with family support
K10	Birmingham	Daughter's engagement planned early	Daughter wanted higher education	Engagement postponed	Daughter married with family support

The empirical results can be explained through diaspora theory, cultural hybridization, and intergenerational conflict. From a diaspora perspective, fixed engagements allow parents to maintain cultural continuity, preserving kinship ties and family honor rooted in Pakistani heritage. Meanwhile, children exposed to Western educational and cultural systems embrace individuality and compatibility. This dual orientation reflects [Bhandari \(2021\)](#) notion of the diaspora as existing within multiple cultural worlds. The theory of cultural hybridization [Grossman \(2019\)](#) also helps explain new, flexible forms of engagement. Families redefine traditions without completely abandoning them: consent-based engagements, postponed marriages, and acceptance of intermarriage represent a blending of heritage with host-society norms. Simultaneously, conflicts between collectivist parental values and individualist youth aspirations illustrate classical intergenerational tension ([Pantazis et al., 2025](#)).

Secondary data provide numerical support for these qualitative findings. Studies by the Institute of Policy Studies (2018) show that arranged marriages among Pakistani families in the UK declined from 60% in the 1980s to 40% in 2015. Similarly, data from the Office of National Statistics (2019) indicate that intermarriage among South Asian communities rose to 25%, reflecting greater autonomy in partner selection. The average age of marriage also increased men from 22–23 years to 30, and women from 21–22 years to 28 as education and career goals gained importance. These patterns confirm that the younger diaspora generation increasingly delays marriage to complete education, aligning with the qualitative cases such as K-2 and K-9 families who prioritized daughters' schooling before engagement ([Iqbal et al., 2022](#); [Small et al., 2025](#)).

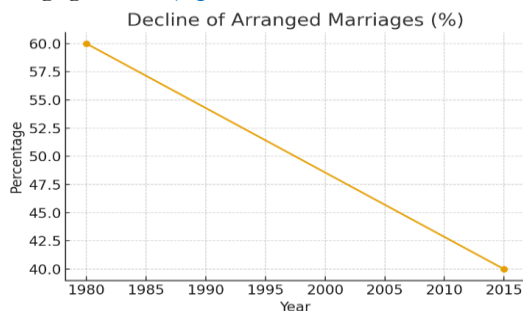


Fig 1. Decline of arranged marriages (%)

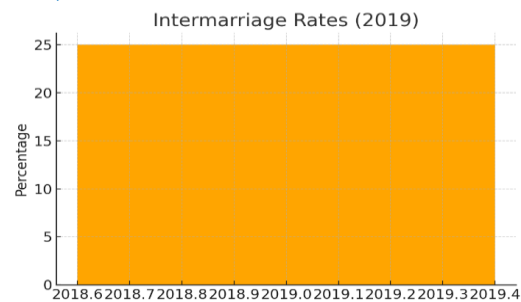


Fig 2. Intermarriage rates (2019)

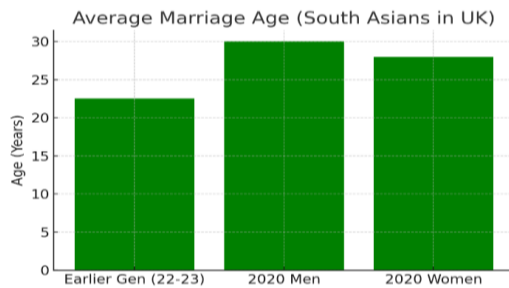


Fig 3. Average marriage age (south Asians in UK)

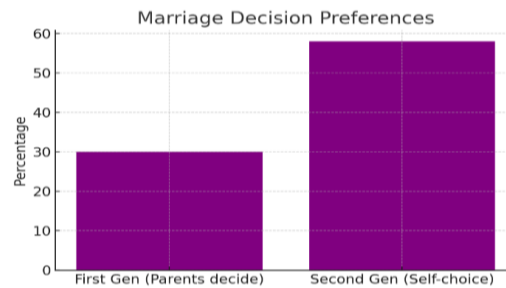


Fig 4. Marriage decision preferences

Panel (a) shows the decline in arranged marriages from 60% in the 1980s to 40% in 2015 (Institute of Policy Studies, 2018). Panel (b) presents the rise of intermarriage rates, reaching 25% in 2019 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Panel (c) illustrates the increase in average marriage age, with South Asian men marrying at 30 and women at 28 in 2020, compared to 22–23 in earlier generations. Panel (d) highlights generational differences in decision-making, with only 30% of first-generation respondents favoring parental choice, while 58% of the second generation prefer self-choice (South Asian Marriage Survey, 2017). Together, these patterns contextualize the qualitative findings on adaptation from fixed engagements to flexible, consent-based models.

The South Asian Marriage Survey (2017) further supports this shift: while 30% of first-generation migrants favored parental control in marriage decisions, 58% of second-generation migrants preferred self-choice. Reports from the UK Children’s Legal Centre also indicate that hundreds of children were referred annually due to concerns about underage or forced marriages, prompting stronger legal frameworks and community education initiatives. Together, these data reinforce that migration, education, and gender awareness are driving the gradual transformation from fixed engagements to consent-based unions (Baumeister & Carabine, 2024; Mullins et al., 2017).

The decline of fixed childhood engagements does not signify complete disappearance but rather transformation into hybrid models balancing tradition and modernity. Socioeconomic progress, particularly female education and financial independence, coupled with UK legal restrictions on underage marriage, have made rigid practices increasingly unsustainable. Families adapt rather than abandon their customs, maintaining cultural identity while allowing greater autonomy for the younger generation. In this evolving framework, compatibility and mutual consent are replacing family honor as the primary basis for marriage decisions.

These findings also highlight the significant role of education particularly Islamic education in shaping new attitudes toward gender equality and marriage practices among the Pakistani diaspora. Islamic teachings emphasize that the pursuit of knowledge (*‘ilm*) is obligatory for both men and women, and that justice (*‘adl*) must guide all social and familial relations. Within the diaspora, families exposed to these principles through community learning, mosque-based education, or parental awareness tend to be more open to delaying engagements until their children complete their studies. This suggests that Islamic educational values can serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity encouraging respect for cultural heritage while affirming the moral right of both boys and girls to education, consent, and personal development before marriage. In this way, the transformation of fixed childhood engagements reflects not only cultural adaptation but also the internalization of Islamic values of justice, equality, and knowledge.

This research indicates the necessity of methods to manage the cultural continuity of Pakistani diaspora families while protecting individual rights. Awareness campaigns on marriage laws, children's rights, and gender equality should be promoted in culturally sensitive ways. Community-based counseling and intergenerational dialogue programs can help families address expectations around marriage without undermining their cultural values (Arnot & Naveed, 2014; Nash, 2024). Governments and NGOs should strengthen legal actions against forced and underage marriages and ensure accessible referral mechanisms through schools, community centers, and mosques. Training for educators, social workers, and religious leaders is also essential to ensure interventions are supportive and respectful rather than confrontational.

For academics, further longitudinal and cross-generational studies are needed to deepen understanding of how traditions evolve within diaspora contexts. Emphasizing adaptation models such as delayed engagements, consent-based unions, and education-focused negotiations can offer more nuanced insights than simply documenting decline. Combining community education, legal protection, and Islamic ethical principles provides a holistic approach to helping diaspora families reimagine engagement practices that harmonize tradition, justice, and individual freedom.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the impact of migration and modernization on the maintenance of fixed childhood engagements among Pakistani diaspora families in the United Kingdom. The results indicate that although fixed engagements remain significant as symbols of cultural preservation, they are being redefined through legal constraints, higher educational aspirations, and exposure to host-society values. Families have adopted three general models of adaptation: postponing engagements until after schooling, moving toward consent-based arrangements, or abandoning prearranged commitments altogether. These adaptations reflect an effort to reconcile cultural traditions with individual rights, showing that tradition is not lost but rather reshaped through negotiation and understanding.

Intergenerational negotiation emerges as the central mechanism of change. While kinship ties and family honor remain important to parents, autonomy and personal compatibility are prioritized by younger generations. The outcome is often a middle ground that blends parental guidance with personal choice, preserving cultural identity through flexibility rather than rigidity. This finding highlights the resilience of cultural practices within the diaspora heritage is not abandoned, but transformed to fit new social realities.

Furthermore, this study underscores the crucial influence of education particularly Islamic education in guiding these transformations. Islamic teachings that emphasize the pursuit of knowledge (*'ilm*) for both men and women and uphold justice (*'adl*) as a social principle provide a moral foundation for gender equality and informed decision-making. Families exposed to these values through religious learning or community education tend to support children's right to complete their education before marriage and to choose their partners responsibly. Therefore, the evolving engagement practices among diaspora families can be viewed not only as cultural adaptation but also as a reflection of Islamic values of justice, equality, and knowledge.

In practical terms, these insights can assist policymakers, educators, and community leaders in designing educational and social programs that promote gender equity and cultural understanding within Muslim communities. By integrating

Islamic educational values with modern social frameworks, diaspora families can continue to uphold their heritage while fostering justice, autonomy, and balanced family development.

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Author Contribution

Syeda Dur e Nayab Haider: Writing-Preparation of original manuscript, Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, **Ayesha Sadaf:** Investigation, Improve Content, Data accuracy, Improve Language.

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The data and language usage in this article have been validated and verified by English language experts and no AI-generated sentences are included in this article.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted without any conflict of interest in the research.

Ethical Clearance

The place or location studied has agreed to conduct research and is willing if the results of this study are published.

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