Bangladeshi female students in higher education: 'agentic autonomy' at the race/gender trajectory

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Abstract

Purpose
This chapter addresses Bangladeshi female students' experiences of higher education in the UK through the race/gender trajectory. Research shows that although minority ethnic women invest heavily in education, they go on to face obstacles in the labour market. However, there is a strong desire to study which is evident in the increasing numbers of Bangladeshi women applying to university since 1994. The chapter draws on empirical research with women who have claimed a kind of 'agentic autonomy' to pursue education in the face of structural inequalities.

Methodology
The chapter is based on research conducted with a sample of Bangladeshi women studying at or recently graduated from university. Qualitative research was carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews with 13 participants.

Findings
The study finds that Bangladeshi women are undeterred by structural inequalities in higher education and employment. Although they expect to face some difficulty finding suitable employment, they are optimistic about the future. They represent a group of women who have been able to achieve their objectives to study at degree level and show aspirations towards achieving similar objectives after graduation.

Social implications/ value of paper
Bangladeshi women show agency and agentic behaviour to negotiate access to higher education institutions. This will in the future have a knock on effect in employment.

Key Words
Bangladeshi women; higher education; agency; agentic autonomy; race; gender

Introduction

I know a degree doesn't guarantee a job but I wanted to do a degree. For me it's an achievement because a degree is worth a lot.

(Fatima, graduate)

The above quote is from one of the women in my research which captures the desire and determination to achieve in education and employment. It is indicative of a trend over the last two decades or so of minority ethnic groups exceeding expectations to gain educational qualifications. Although the Indian, Chinese and Black African groups have consistently performed as well or better than their white counterparts, groups such as Bangladeshi women have made the most progress (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007; Richardson, 2008). This has been reflected in newspaper articles that reported on a research conducted by the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (University of Manchester) in sensational headlines such as 'White British adults "less qualified" than ethnic minorities' (*The Telegraph*, 2014). Ahead of the above research being presented at the House of Lords, newspaper reports highlighted that there is a long way to go for minority ethnic groups to fulfil their aspirations (*The Guardian*, 2014). Given the contradictory nature of reports, this chapter explores higher education experiences of Bangladeshi women who are positioned at the race/gender trajectory. Overall, research shows that although minority ethnic women invest heavily in education, they go on to face obstacles in the labour market (Heath & Cheung, 2006). However, there is a strong desire to study which is evident in the increasing numbers of minority ethnic women applying to universities over the last 25 years in the UK. The chapter draws on research specifically with Bangladeshi women who have claimed a kind of 'agentic autonomy' to pursue education in the face of structural inequalities. The women's agentic behaviour includes taking advantage of opportunities in order to have control over their lives and activities. Therefore, they represent a group of women who have been able to achieve their objective to study at degree level and show aspirations towards achieving similar objectives after graduation in the labour market.

The racialised gendering of labour markets is not a new phenomenon yet it persists. Although progress has been made with reference to educational qualifications since the publication of the Report *Moving on Up: Ethnic Minority Women at Work* in 2007 (EOC), Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean women face obstacles in their efforts to participate in the labour market. Once in the labour market they struggle to compete with other workers with reference to work that is commensurate with qualifications, promotion and pay. This is despite them having the same aspirations as other minority ethnic groups (Black African, Chinese, Indian). It demonstrates that young minority ethnic women have invested heavily in their education and shown determination to overcome the obstacles they face in employment such as lower

glass ceilings, racism and sexism (Dale, 2002; Dale Lindley and Dex, 2006; Heath, Fuller & Paton, 2008; Lindley, Dale and Dex, 2006). This is borne out by the quote at the beginning by one of the participants and statistics that demonstrate increasingly high levels of participation in higher education by minority ethnic women[1] (Ball, 2003). Furthermore, according to calculations made of HESA data from 2006 by Niven, Faggian and Ruwanpura (2013) show that:

> Bangladeshi women were better represented at 'old' universities (pre-1992) than young British-Bangladeshi men. This result is even more surprising if we consider that young British Bangladeshi women are often subjected to strict parental control and not allowed to attend higher education institutions too far away from the parental domicile, which considerably restricts their choices.

> (Niven, Faggian, and Ruwanpura, 2013, p.121)

Given the context above and how structural inequalities operate, the first part of the chapter shows the women's awareness of structural inequalities whilst maintaining a strong desire to study and work, which flies in the face of stereotypical expectations of certain minority ethnic women (Heath and Brinbaum, 2007). It explores how agency is operationalised by Bangladeshi women despite the varying constraints and social restrictions imposed on them by the family (Bhopal, 2010; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007). It will be shown that agency is involved in the desire for higher qualifications through 'agentic autonomy'.

Agency and Education

The implication of increasing numbers of Bangladeshi women entering higher education institutions is that they are actively engaged in attempting to secure a better future. The operationalisation of agency and 'agentic autonomy' indicates how a generation of women is actively involved in a type of social transformation which has implications for future gender relations. This chapter departs from the many studies carried out on the relationship between social/ethnic capital and acquisition of educational credentials (Crozier & Davies, 2006; Modood, 2004; Shah, Dwyer & Modood, 2010; Thapar-Bjorkert & Sanghera). Although they provide a good explanatory framework, they tend to focus on the family and the acquisition of social capital by the younger generation. As a result, the agency or agentic autonomy of young women is overlooked and it is with this in mind that I have utilised these concepts as a framework of analysis.

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[1] This would appear to go against the idea that students who gain educational credentials possess more cultural capital. For an examination of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital performance in school examinations see Sullivan, A. (2001) Cultural capital and educational attainment. *Sociology,* 35(4), 893-912.

Furthermore, agentic autonomy and its relationship to social capital has been taken up by some writers who recognise the potential of such an alliance to transform gendered relations (Bruegel 2005; Lister, 2005). It has been shown by some feminists that there are advantages in utilising social capital as an analytical concept to understand how gendered power structures are reproduced in society and how they can be challenged (Kovalainen, 2004; (Lowndes, 2004;). The feminist critique takes into account the existence of structural inequalities relating not only to social deprivation but gender, race and class. If social capital raises questions about its applicability and explanatory power, the conceptualisation of agency is not straight forward either. The question of agency is fraught with difficulties and embedded in ambiguity; it remains a hotly debated issue. Viewed as operating through the race/gender trajectory, we can see how agency 'is embedded in women's lifecycles, everyday practices and cultural expectation' (Ciotti, 2009, p.113). In *Gender and Agency,* Lois McNay proposes that agency needs to move away from the dialectic of freedom and constraint to its contextualisation within power relations (McNay, 2000, p.2). This would provide a way to understand acts of resistance in the face of constricting social sanctions. It is particularly relevant to the women in my research as they grapple with gender, class, race and generational inequalities. McNay puts forward the following:

> A more precise and varied account of agency is required to explain the differing motivations and ways in which individuals and groups struggle over, appropriate and transform cultural meanings and resources. This in turn, indicates the necessity of contextualizing agency within power relations in order to understand how acts deemed as resistant may transcend their immediate sphere in order to transform collective behaviour and norms.

> (McNay, 2000, p.4)

The ideas of collective behaviour and norms are applicable within the context of social change which young Bangladeshi women are involved in with regard to education. If we accept that education is a causal factor in social change then we also need to look at the relationship between agency and autonomy. Judith Butler has argued that the female subject is constituted through processes of 'exclusion', 'differentiation' and 'repression', which are obscured by illusory notions of autonomy (Butler, 1990). These processes serve to position women as the subordinate Other, rendering them invisible. To an extent this is applicable to Bangladeshi women and their experiences of the labour market in which they are under-represented. Although the women are excluded from the labour market to a greater extent than other minority ethnic groups, they show the ability to use their agency in order to pursue goals and aspirations.

Human agency or agentic behaviour includes taking advantage of opportunities and to have some control over one's life and activities (Meyers, 2004). It also involves the

use of autonomy, however, people's autonomy levels vary in different situations with some people having considerable control over others. Thus in South Asian families, parents exert more control over their daughters when entry into higher education is being considered (generational inequalities) (Niven et al., 2013). There are obvious difficulties in connecting agency with autonomy as autonomy can be compromised (Takhar, 2006; Weinreich, 2002). Agentic autonomy and the ability to act, in the context of this article, refers to Bangladeshi women pursuing their goals. For Meyers (2004), it seems the acts of choosing, deciding and valuing are central to being an autonomous subject. The actual content of the choices one might make does not seem of importance, therefore one can 'choose' from the various means to achieve a range of goals and act intentionally. Intentional action is based on the women's assessment of whether they have the agentic capacity to carry this through. From the evidence of statistics of young Bangladeshi women in higher education, it shows that they do have agentic capacity, capability and relative autonomy which is expressed by one of the participants:

> *I know a degree doesn't guarantee a job, but I know I'm capable of a lot more. I know there are some people don't want to do a degree, they think they won't be able to cope, some people are just not bothered. But I wanted to do a degree, for me it's an achievement more than if I was to do ten little courses here and there – you know the ones that you can do at college. For me, a degree is worth a lot more, it's valued a lot more.*

> (Yasmina, undergraduate student)

The high value placed on the acquisition of a degree uncovers the 'agentic self' which refers to how people discover their own capabilities and identity. It relates to a process that 'contributes to an integrated sense of personal agency' (Little, 2006, p.226). The concepts 'agentic self' and 'agentic autonomy' are used within psychology to explain the processes that are similar to those experienced by young Bangladeshi women in the pursuit of education and work. It is worthwhile to remember also that the 'agent' is located within social and cultural contexts and has to negotiate within set parameters, something that Bangladeshi women have done with reference to education. What they have done through a self-realised agency is to bring about gradual social change by refusing to comply with dominant discourses. When we desire something we try by different means to get what we want and need in order to arrive at a self that is acceptable to us. The following captures what it means to do what you desire and arrive at a position that is acceptable:

> *Achievement is down to the individual and with determination and finding the right resources, you can get into any field.*

> (Rowena, graduate)

The resources referred to here are not only material but realising her own capability to assert what she desired i.e. her agency enabled her 'to act in one's best interest' (hooks,1990:206). Doing what one desires and what is in one's best interest is also applicable to family and community interests, therefore young Bangladeshi women have been able to draw on a range of sources to satisfy their desire to study and work

Methodology

Qualitative research in the form of case study interviews was carried out with a sample of Bangladeshi (13) women studying at a post 1992 university. They were recruited through advertising for participants through posters at the university and due to the timing of the research, some had recently graduated. The sample group consisted of women between 19 and 23 years a range of subject areas of the university. All have ethnic origins in Bangladesh and are Muslims, none live on campus, all are single and come from what would be described as working class backgrounds. All of the participants were born in the UK and four had recently graduated. The aim of the research was to analyse their aspirations concerning education, employment and career development. Their experiences of higher education were explored in connection with negotiating routes, managing their desires and frustrations and how universities can aid in their progression to a career. The interviews provided the women with a space from which they not only spoke about their experiences but were also able to explore their own thinking about particular issues and reflect on decisions they had made. The individual case studies give voice to women who often simultaneously form part of a highly visible/invisible group. During the interview a range of areas were covered from their family background to specific experience, family support, careers and employment, and structural inequalities such as sexism and racism. The aim was to provide useful insights to the experiences of this group of women in university in the context of their ability to use agency. The objective of the research was to make recommendations regarding the role of the careers service, work experience schemes and the establishment of links with potential employers. It is to the link between educational attainment, employment and social mobility that we turn to in the next section.

Negotiating Educational Desire[2]

The desire to study among minority ethnic women is evident in the increasing numbers applying to universities since 1994. The highest growth in applications has

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[2] See Mirza, H and Reay, D. (2000) Spaces and places of black educational desire: rethinking black supplementary schools as a new social movement. *Sociology*, 34(3), 521-544.

been amongst Bangladeshi and Pakistani young women (HESA, 2006 cited in Niven et al., 2013). Previous research has shown that there have been marked differences amongst minority ethnic groups in terms of applying to and getting into university. Amongst the Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups in the past, more young men applied to university than young women indicating a gender gap (Connor, Modood &illlage al, 2004; Modood & Shiner, 1994; Shiner & Modood, 2002). In addition to this, despite the increase in the number of minority ethnic students staying in full time education, they were disadvantaged with reference to the non-traditional route followed into higher education. It has been shown that disadvantage experienced by Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women begins at entry point to higher education institutions, i.e. access and type of institution(Broecke & Hamed, 2008). It has resulted in lower acceptance levels into higher education institutions and had a knock on effect of disadvantage at the shortlisting stage by graduate recruiters (Taylor, 1993). Although new universities have operated admissions policies that are more flexible, Connor, La Valle, Tackey, and Perryman (1996) found in their study conducted in 1993, that Bangladeshi women were under-represented. Indeed Bangladeshi women who attended universities and acquired a degree during the first half of the 1990s, have been referred to as 'pioneers' who struggled to overcome barriers to their education. They asserted their agency and negotiated with their parents to allow them to study in opposition to expectations of the parents and community, i.e. marriage as a priority (Bhopal, 2010; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007). The Bangladeshi women in the research are subjected to racialied gendered identity and have 'struggle[d] for educational inclusion in order to transform their opportunities and in doing so subvert racist expectations and beliefs' (Basit, 1997; Mirza, 2009: 153, Shain, 2003). Projecting into the future benefits of a degree qualification is highlighted by their narratives below:

> *In this modern age everyone is studying, even all the girls, not like in my sister's time when the girls were getting married rather than studying.*

(Farida, undergraduate student)

> *I've always wanted to come to university and graduate, and my family wanted me to come to university as well. I'm like the first person in my family to come to uni so it's like a big accomplishment for them. I just thought getting a degree and stuff would help me in getting a better job I knew I could use my degree to my advantage.*

(Yasmina, undergraduate student,)

> *My parents saw my uncles and aunties graduate and they got good jobs, so they got something out of their degrees and that was a great influence. Another thing is that I have to an influence my sisters, I have to be a role model to them and encourage them. If I do well, then they do well.*

(Jahanara, undergraduate student)

I am definitely ambitious in the sense that I need to work and be independent. I don't want to be dependent on anybody. That's the one thing my parents – my dad, well actually both my parents – they wanted me to get a degree and do my own thing rather than depend on anyone.

(Jasmine, undergraduate)

Over a number of decades, minority ethnic communities have been engaged in a struggle in connection with access to educational opportunities, which as Mirza (2009, p.153) states is 'a struggle for humanity [and] for a black person to become educated is to become human.' The latter part of the quote informs us how certain minority ethnic groups are only assigned the 'human' status once they have acquired language and education. This 'putting on of the white world' (Fanon, 1986, p.36) brings to the fore the colonial encounter whereby the colonised subject through acquisition of language and behaviour of the 'civilised' simultaneously reassures and threatens. Although minority ethnic women are positioned as subordinate through stereotyping and dominant discourses, they are actively engaged in transformation from the 'margin' (Bhabha, 1990). Being located at the margin does not imply a position of weakness or a 'marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures' (hooks, 1992, p. 22), rather it has been regarded as a site of resistance. The margin has also been referred to as the 'third space' where 'everything comes together':

> Subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and concrete, the real and imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.

(Soja, 1996, pp. 56-57)

The 'third space' has been used to demonstrate that although racism and sexism are experienced in educational institutions by minority ethnic women, they demonstrate a resistance which has the resources of the centre (Mirza, 2006 and 2009; Mirza & Reay, 2000; Takhar, 2013). Despite being considered as 'out of place' (Puwar, 2004, p.51), the third space is where a type of disruption and coming together of history and identity occur. Although the women may have 'a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded' (Reay, Davies, David and Ball, 2001, p.864), the process of applying to university has continued. Women in the research demonstrated determination to enter university based on the high value attached to education, evident amongst all minority ethnic groups. Indeed in terms of attainment, 'women from the British Bangladeshi community have recorded a threefold increase in higher educational attainment (Niven at al., 2013, p.

121). Although education is popular, some young women, however, were and still are restricted to higher education institutions that are closer to home. This does not detract from the determination to succeed, rather it indicates a process of negotiation that involves compromise to achieve what they desire i.e. to fulfil their aspirations (Bhopal, 2010; Dale, Shaheen, Kalra & Fieldhouse, 2002; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007; Dale, et al, 2002). The young women understand that restrictions are imposed on them in response to their possible corruption by western influences if they studied away from home. Within South Asian communities, women are carriers of the family's honour (*'izzat'*) and must avoid shame (*'sharam)* (Patel, 1997; Siddiqui, 2000; Wilson, 2006*).* However, as a consequence of the restrictions imposed on them they are placed at a disadvantage by their relative geographical immobility when attempting to find suitable employment (ECU, 2010; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007; Women and Equality Unit, 2006). Studying, therefore, involves agency through negotiation with parents but living away from home would require a considerable amount of negotiation, which some have done successfully and gone on to enter older universities. The ability to move geographically in turn has a positive effect on employment opportunities (Ahmad, 2005; Niven et al., 2013). Given the above, it is also important not to present women as victims rather we can present them as having agency or 'agentic autonomy' in connection with education (Housee, 2004; Mirza, 2009; Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006).

The Unavoidable Link: education and work

Research has shown that minority ethnic students are clustered in post 1992 universities which provide a challenge particularly with reference to employment (Curtis, 2006; Modood, 2006). There are exceptions to the rule such as King's College, LSE and Imperial College. It is also becoming evident that the widening participation *and* equality and diversity agendas do not take into consideration the expected discrimination and marginalisation of these groups in universities and employment. However, it is precisely the existence of admissions policies, widening participation and outreach work of the 'old' universities that has resulted in the gradual increase in minority ethnic students studying at degree level (Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Despite the increase in numbers in higher education institutions, evidence indicates that institutional racism, stereotyping and tokenism continues into employment (Bhavnani & Mirza, 2005; Jones, 1993; Mason, 2003; Moosa, 2008; Peach, 2006). Although widening participation has encouraged the inclusion of previously marginalised groups, one of the participants stated the following about the Bangladeshi community and being a Muslim female:

> *As an ethnic community, we have the potential to do better however, the word 'Bengali' is at the bottom of the pile. It conjures up a sense of failure among others. Bengalis have potential and hidden talent. Bengali students should work hard to challenge these negative views and they should be given the opportunity to show off their talents.*

(Fatima, graduate)

There is complexity to how certain minority ethnic communities are seen with the overlapping of factors such as socio-economic status, class background, migration and possession of capital. The difficulties associated with being Muslim expressed by Fatima above is similar to Mirza (2006) commenting on her daughter having to change her Muslim name to secure a job interview. Given that widening participation (David, 2009; Weekes-Bernard, 2010) has been at the forefront of educational policies to increase the numbers of marginalised students into higher education in pre and post-1992 universities, the Bangladeshi community continues to be seen as the most disadvantaged. If we accept that education moulds and prepares individuals for employment, it would be expected that due to race relations legislation (1965, 1968, 1976, 2000) and the Equality Act (2010) that the economic environment would have improved over time. Instead findings from research show that occupational segregation for minority ethnic women is severe, therefore they find it 'difficult to fulfil their potential' (EOC, 2007, p.4; Platt, 2002). The occupational segregation of minority ethnic women has been well documented in the past (Afshar, 1989 and 1994; Brah & Shaw, 1992; Breugel, 1989; Bryan, Dazie and Scafe, 1985). Yet it is their less favourable positioning in the labour market that has compounded structural inequalities and lead to segregated labour market patterns. Whilst earlier research displays a more straight forward picture of inequalities, the 1990s presented evidence of a more varied and diverse nature which offered hope in the form of better job prospects (Dale et al., 2002; Joly, 1995; Lindley, 1994).

Discrimination

Furthermore by problematising reductionist discourses of 'modern' and 'traditional' that are used to describe Muslim women (particularly since the London bombings in 20015) challenges universities and employers to accept them as a resource rather than a burden (Crozier & Davies, 2006; Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006). The importance of religion (Islam was expressed by the participants and they were aware of the challenges ahead but were not open to compromise on the issue of Islamic dress:

> *Religion is very important to me because I am a practising Muslim and I pray five time s a day and in terms of the university, I am grateful that there is a prayer room.*

(Henna, graduate)

> *I wear a headscarf and if for a job or something, I was told that I couldn't wear my scarf or I had to dress in a particular way that I felt uncomfortable with, that didn't follow the way that Muslims dress…I wouldn't take up that job. I*

wouldn't do anything that was considered wrong by Islam – drink alcohol or drugs or anything.

(Yasmin, undergraduate)

Employers will think twice about employing you.

(Jahanara, undergraduate)

I wouldn't go to those kinds of jobs anyway where I would feel out of place, where everyone's wearing suits or whatever and I'm the only odd one out wearing this (Islamic dress). I'd look for a place where I'd feel comfortable wearing what I wear.

(Ameera, undergraduate)

The last response is from a woman who recognises that she is at a disadvantage with reference to dress and has thus focused on working in a hospital located in an area with Sylhetti speakers. She is therefore able to use her language and professional skills in an environment where she feels comfortable. Most of the women commented on the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media (Macdonald, 2006) and worried that if they did find suitable employment, they may not progress up the career ladder:

I am optimistic but sometimes all this Islamophobia stuff doesn't help. Sometimes you just think oh my God how are they viewing me? Do they think that I'm a terrorist? All the islamophobia is worrying me about what's going to happen to us Muslims getting employment.

(Maryam, graduate)

Similarly in education, it has been noted that although minority ethnic women have struggled for inclusion, they have taken opportunities and continue to aspire to upward social mobility and have underlying adherence to the concept of meritocracy (Mirza, 2006 and 2009; Reynolds, 1997). Although minority ethnic women have improved their marketability through acquiring qualifications, it is interesting to note that Baroness Valerie Amos only recently took charge of SOAS thereby becoming the first female black woman to do so (THES[3], Monday June 29, 2015). In politics there are currently six South Asian two black female MPS representing a small minority in the House of Commons. However, the women I interviewed were undeterred by such statistics and continued in their ambitions to lead a better life through acquiring educational credentials. It demonstrates minority ethnic women's

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[3] Time Higher Educational Supplement.

and Bangladeshi women in particular, desire to be successful at university and in employment. Indeed the increasing numbers of these young women entering universities and gaining higher education qualifications show they are able to negotiate routes into education and promote social change. They were also acutely aware of discrimination:

> *Certain industries are looking for independent career women ads because employers have this stereotypical view of Asian women, they would rather employ a white woman. Searching for jobs is hard if you have a Muslim name. You will be placed at the bottom of the pile. Employers view Asian women as risky so there is sexism and Asian women suffer multiple forms of discrimination.*

> (Fatima, graduate)

> *I know women in general do face discrimination and regardless of what your background is, women face discrimination. So it doesn't help that I'm a woman, it doesn't help that you know that I'm a Muslim, all those things that are possible barriers.*

> (Latifa, undergraduate)

> *Three of us, two Bangladeshis and one Indian did a SWOT analysis. The threat for all of us was our background – our ethnicity. I mean that is our treat once we get into employment. That is a barrier, so I have concerns about that as well. I think having no experience and then having that ethnicity as an issue when finding a job would be both a problem.*

> (Jahanara, undergraduate)

Due to the possible difficulties the work placement appeared to find resonance amongst the women interviewed:

> *I think it's such a great idea. Everyone talks about the fact that graduates don't find themselves a job as soon as they leave. Work placements help employers to actually accept you because you've got that from the university, the knowledge, as well as the experience. You can get a good reference as well.*

> (Latifa, undergraduate)

> *It would have been very helpful to have a work placement in terms of getting employment, developing experience.*

(Maryam, graduate)

Valuing Education and its consequences

It would be short-sighted at this stage to state that Bangladeshi Muslim communities have been left untouched by external influences due to young women in universities and in employment. Muslim communities have been presented as lacking resources, living in segregated communities and leading 'parallel lives' but in doing so avoids looking at structural inequalities along the lines of class, race and gender (Cantle Report, 2001). The failure 'to recognise the significance of wider social and economic forces and the inequalities they produce' (Franklin, 2001, p. 2) questions how empowerment and demands for resources can occur (Campbell, 2001; Gouldbourne & Solomos, 2003). Finney and Simpson (2009) refute the claim of segregation arguing that media perpetuate the myth of certain communities as a burden. Although there is recognition of structural inequalities and institutional racism, which could make a community look inwards, the women in the research continued to aspire to work in professional settings (Mirza, 2009). It is evident from the responses given by some of the participants that going to university was a parental expectation. There was also reliance on family members who had attended university for advice although one participant was guided by her school teacher into university. The choices made by the women represent a cross over between the 'contingent chooser' (encouragement and expectation) and the 'embedded chooser' (knowledge of league tables, no financial worries):

> The contingent chooser is typically a first generation applicant to higher education whose parents were educated outside of the UK. Their parents are working class and have low incomes. […] The process of information gathering and choice is left to the student, who will often act on the basis of very limited information. […] The embedded chooser has parents who attended university and often other relatives and friends with experience of university, although not necessarily in the UK. […] Not to go on to higher education is virtually unthinkable and certainly unacceptable to parents.

> (Reay, David and Ball, 2005: 113-119).

Both aspects of choosing are evident in the narratives of the women I interviewed:

> *My dad said to me you don't have to rely on people. You know, after marriage one of the issues he used to tell my mum was that "she doesn't have to fall back on anyone after marriage, she's got her stuff, she's got her education, she's got her job, she doesn't have to rely on anyone." The influence my father had on me was so great, it was like now I understand what he means. I think I'm happy because without dad's encouragement I wouldn't have been*

here. I probably would have been in some local job, doing something and probably getting married soon […] I wanted to go to university.

(Jahanara, undergraduate)

My dad and my sisters are my role models. My dad gives me positive advice and support. He is a good role model for me because he had a difficult start when he came to Britain thirty years ago with nothing and then opened his business.

(Fatima, graduate)

I have three brothers and four sisters, I am the youngest. Although my brothers went to university, my sisters didn't so I am the first daughter to go to university […] Going to university wasn't up for discussion…my parents, my father wanted and encouraged me to study at university. He had very high expectations. Education is highly valued in the Asian community. My father wanted me to study IT which is highly valued in the Asian community. I am keeping teaching as an option as youth work is not viewed as 'high ranking' or 'respectable'.

(Joshna, undergraduate)

They [parents] always wanted me to study so they wanted me to go to college. My dad has always said that he wanted me to do something with my life like become something…just do something different to what everyone else has done. He's really happy and he wants me to carry on the way I am. That's like motivated me but I wouldn't call that pressure or anything.

(Yasmina, undergraduate)

In order to arrive at a self that is acceptable through a self-realised agency, the women were not necessarily involved in negotiating terms for attending university. Despite the university being 'local', the positive attitude of parents and fathers in particular, towards education challenge the stereotype of Muslim fathers as oppressive. Instead they are central to their daughters' academic achievements as it brings not only economic capital but 'prestigious capital' (Ahmad, 2005, p.275) alongside a liberal and educated status to the family as a whole. Indeed 'this pursuit of 'educational prestige' is not simply a middle-class strategy' (ibid: 276). Research therefore flies in the face of the stereotype of the Muslim family as patriarchal and the women as oppressed and subservient. Therefore, located in family and community networks there are young people who have succeeded and are therefore considered to be role models.

A subsequent effect of the high value placed on female education is the effect it has had on negotiating marriage. Therefore, families were also aware of the value of a qualified woman in terms of earning power and this increased the chance of finding a more suitable husband (Ahmad, 2005). Social change and changes in attitudes towards education and marriage have occurred gradually over the last two decades. If 'agentic autonomy' is evidenced through women's successful negotiation regarding education and work, I have argued that it is also present in negotiating marriage (Takhar, 2013). One of the women stated that her aunt who is in her early thirties is not married which is uncommon and that her own parents encouraged her to find herself a suitable partner. She is engaged to a Muslim man and commented that:

> My family is very liberal and there is no pressure for me to get married. I have not set a date to get married because I am not ready. I plan to focus on my career first and gaining another qualification would require time and commitment.

(Fatima, graduate)

Liberal attitudes and negotiating marriage is something that has developed over time within the Asian community (Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani communities (Bhopal, 2000; Gardner & Shukur, 2004; Ramji, 2003). For Bangladeshi women 'the opportunity to go to university was used to defer and negotiate the timing of marriage' (Hussain & Bgguley, 2007, p.91). Furthermore, liberal attitudes, the ability to build links with different people through university and work, and discussions between parents and their daughters are also evident amongst the women interviewed:

> My parents do get worried, though they say "oh don't do this, don't do that". But I say that I have more non-Muslim friends than Muslim friends and they understand and when they don't understand they ask me. My friends are mainly white and there is one homosexual Pakistani guy.

(Jasmine, undergraduate)

Although the quote above is one example of evidence that indicates a shift in friendship and support networks for minority ethnic women, the friendships are weaker than those with whom they can experience a level of support, belonging, security (Bhopal, 2010). Friendship networks are based on feelings of exclusion, marginalisation and sometimes racism (Bhopal, 2010; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007; Puwar, 2004; Shain, 2003;). Working within an Islamic framework is with reference to friendship and socialising is exemplified by the following narrative:

> I still go out with my friends I go out in the evening – my parents are really good with that, they're really good, obviously I've got a deadline…time out

kind of curfew, it is better than most Bengali and Pakistani girls I know. So my parents are quite liberal. I mean they're strict in the sense that they think that we should follow Islam and pray, wear the head-scarf us being girls and things like that. I think we should follow that because that's what Islam says, that's what Islam is about, it's not complicated.

(Joshna, undergraduate)

Religion has been shown to act as a positive leverage for young women who have drawn on the importance placed on education by Islam for both men and women. Through this mechanism, religion has acquired the status of being more progressive than culture and the cultural community (Takhar, 2013). Furthermore, some women have also been able to appease the 'cultural community' by ensuring that they adhere to wearing Islamic dress. For these women, dress codes act as symbols of attachment to Islam and therefore facilitate more freedom to study and socialise. This can be conceptualised as an inventive way of building social capital amongst the young women within a framework that is acceptable for the community and the family

Conclusion

This chapter has shown through empirical evidence that the educational and employment aspirations of young Bangladeshi women remain intact with a high value placed on educational qualifications. Although previous research indicates low levels of participation in higher education and employment amongst this minority ethnic group, the situation has changed dramatically over the last two decades. It has been accompanied by changes in attitudes towards the education of girls and young women amongst the Muslim community. Participation does not correspond with their relatively disadvantaged positions in British society yet despite encountering structural inequalities there has been a gradual increase in educational attainment. The research is not a representation of Bangladeshi women, however, the results support that education is regarded highly and that negotiations are occurring between the young women and their parents. The success of young women is also dependent on their ability to strike the right balance between educational attainment and protecting their family's honour. The process of entering higher education institutions requires from young women a more complex level of negotiation in comparison to young men. Their ability to carry through the negotiation the young women have demonstrated that they have the determination to arrive at a self that is acceptable to them. Through a self-realised agency and the refusal to comply with dominant discourses, they have exhibited 'agentic autonomy' in their decision to enter higher education and to act in their own interest. It also challenges the stereotype of Muslim fathers as oppressive. Instead they are central to their daughters' academic achievements as it brings prestige and status to the family as a whole. Through presenting a liberal and educated status, the women are able to

negotiate marriage to a more suitably educated man who is already in employment. Although patriarchal oppression varies between and amongst South Asian communities, the increasing numbers of Bangladeshi women in higher education institutions in the UK challenges the perception of the Muslim family as only patriarchal.

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