

# Attacking transnationalism and citizenship: British Bangladeshis, family migration, and the postcolonial state

EVE DICKSON

*University College London, UK*

VICTORIA REDCLIFT

*University College London, UK*

FATIMA RAJINA

*De Montfort University, UK*

## Abstract

In July 2012, major changes to the family migration rules were made in the UK, severely restricting British and settled residents' rights to sponsor non-EEA family members. However, little is known about how they have been experienced in practice, particularly by the South Asian families they target. Our article draws on policy and media analysis alongside original qualitative research to shed light on how the 2012 family migration rules have impacted British Bangladeshis, and with what consequences for their experiences of citizenship and the possibilities of them leading transnational lives. We argue that the rules amount to a raced, gendered, and classed 'attack' on both transnationalism and citizenship and suggest that, while transnationalism and citizenship are often analysed separately, they are in fact deeply intertwined.

---

### Corresponding author:

Eve Dickson, UCL Social Research Institute, University College London, 27 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AA, UK.

Email: [eve.dickson@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:eve.dickson@ucl.ac.uk)

*Critical Social Policy* 1–22

© The Author(s) 2023 Article reuse guidelines: [sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: [10.1177/02610183231185756](https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183231185756) [journals.sagepub.com/home/csp](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/csp)

**Keywords**

transnational marriage, bordering, South Asian families, marriage migration, racial neoliberalism

**Introduction**

In July 2012, major changes to the family migration rules were made in the UK. These rules significantly restricted British and settled residents' rights to bring non-EEA family members to the country. Although existing scholarship has analysed the raced and classed (Sirriyeh, 2015; Turner, 2015) and to a lesser extent gendered (Sumption and Vargas-Silva, 2019) nature of these changes, little is known about how they have been experienced in practice, particularly by the South Asian families they target. In this article, we draw on critical discourse analysis of policy and media alongside original qualitative research in Birmingham, Luton, and Tower Hamlets to shed light on how the 2012 family migration rules have been experienced and understood by British Bangladeshis, and with what consequences for their identities as citizens and ability to lead transnational lives.

We first outline the 2012 changes and the ways in which rhetoric around them problematised South Asian families, contextualising the racialised pathologisation of South Asian family migration within a much longer (post)colonial history. The article then turns to our first core argument – that the changes to the family migration rules amount to a raced, gendered, and classed 'attack' on transnationalism. We emphasise the racialised suspicion towards transnational ties contained in national discourse, before examining qualitative interviews from our research with British Bangladeshis to show how this 'attack' on transnationalism has been experienced in practice, particularly by women. We emphasise the deterrent effect of the rules and the anxieties this evoked for interviewees around the waning of transnational connections. We suggest that these hostile immigration restrictions have contributed to changing attitudes around transnational marriage amongst British Bangladeshis, producing financial and other burdens to such an extent that the institution of transnational marriage itself has been transformed.

In the second half of our article, we conceptualise the 2012 rules as an 'attack' on the citizenship of British South Asians. Here, we examine the rhetoric around the changes in relation to: (1) the neoliberal responsabilisation of citizens; (2) state 'protection' of citizens from themselves. We juxtapose this with interviews in which participants describe how the minimum income requirement (MIR) underscores their second-class citizenship at the same time as it allows the state to avoid any acknowledgment of racialisation; demonstrating the logic of racial neoliberalism at the heart of the immigration

system (Goldberg, 2009). We conclude by bringing together these two core arguments, showing how experiences of transnationalism and citizenship benefit from collective examination. For many of our participants, racial neo-liberalism (Goldberg, 2009) in one is reflected and co-constituted in the other.

## The 2012 family migration rules

The 2012 overhaul of the family migration rules formed part of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's drive to radically reduce net migration. Greater control was heralded by the state as the answer to Britain's 'broken' immigration system as well as a whole host of other social problems, such as 'insular communities' (Home Office, 2012). Largely unable to control EU migration due to the directive on freedom of movement, the government turned to non-EEA migration to meet this aim. The family migration route was framed by the Home Office (2011) as a 'back door' to the UK, one requiring 'greater selectivity'. 'Cracking down on abuse' was a key state refrain, alongside 'promoting integration' and 'reducing the burden on the taxpayer' (Home Office, 2011). These changes were made in the same year that Home Secretary Theresa May announced her intention to create a 'really hostile environment' for irregularised migrants in Britain (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021), a policy shift that has also had detrimental impacts on migrants with regularised status and British citizens.

Under the 2012 changes, a raft of new measures made it substantially harder for British and settled residents to sponsor non-EEA family members. These included the introduction of an annual MIR of £18,600 – a significant increase from the previous threshold (£5500 per year, in line with income support), bringing the maintenance requirement to one of the world's highest (Huddleston, 2012). This measure was premised on economic analysis conducted by the government's Migration Advisory Committee (2011), which was tasked with determining what level of income families required in order not to 'becom[e] a burden on the State'. The policy is particularly harsh because it only allows for income from employment to count towards the requirement, excluding the non-British partner's past, current or potential earnings, unless they are already legally working in the UK. Cash savings can be used to meet the threshold, but only where they exceed £16,000. Initially, support from third parties was excluded, but the rules were marginally relaxed following litigation, allowing for discretion in 'exceptional circumstances' (Bettiga, 2018). The government also extended the probationary period for sponsored partners from two to five years, during which immigration status is more precarious and access to most welfare benefits and social housing is restricted under the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) rule – a condition that has been shown to 'enforce destitution and

debt' in highly racialised and gendered ways (Dickson and Rosen, 2021), as well as leaving women more vulnerable to domestic abuse (Anitha, 2008). Through quantitative analysis of survey data, Sumption and Vargas-Silva (2019) found that the MIR would disproportionately affect women and ethnic minorities, whose earnings were more likely to be under the threshold. Recent scholarship has also highlighted the inter-connected facets of economic, social and cultural class that underpin the policies. In this context, economic aspects of class, such as income and capital, intersect with other modes through which class is marked and reproduced, such as ideas about individualised responsibility and family life (Sirriyeh, 2015). As Sirriyeh (2015) argues, those who engage in the 'wrong' kind of transnational marriage (e.g., without a high income) are rendered 'failed citizens' (Anderson, 2013) in need of governance.

Since Brexit, the 2012 family migration rules have been extended to EU citizens who do not hold (pre-)settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme. This development not only affects the sponsorship of EU and non-EEA national family members by EU and British citizens, but represents a closing down of the 'Surinder Singh' route – a mechanism through which British nationals could circumvent UK restrictions via EU family reunification laws (Wray et al., 2021).

## **Problematizing South Asian families**

Turner (2015: 632) situates the current governance of marriage migration within the broader historical control of intimacy and sexuality in (post)colonial Britain, arguing that the family has long been, and continues to be, a site of imperial anxiety, where 'desirable and undesirable forms of migration, and racial/sexual proximity' are regulated. While this regulation can be traced back to colonial practice, the post-1948 period witnessed an escalated focus on the familial relations of migrant subjects (Kofman et al., 2008). Initially, female migrants were encouraged; understood to counteract the sexual threat posed by Commonwealth migrants already in the UK through racial containment (Smith and Marmo, 2011). However, in the late 1960s 'the migrant family increasingly became viewed as a fertile breeding ground for difference inside the 'pure' national space' (Turner, 2015: 633), demanding an assessment from authorities as to which familial relations were 'genuine'. The stereotypes of South Asian families as repressive and constraining, and South Asian women as passive victims of homogenous cultures that oppress them (Ahmad, 2006), is central to understanding how they have been placed under the legislative gaze of the state (Alexander, 2004). In this context, the racialised and paternalistic discourse of the emancipation of South Asian women from 'forced' marriage has been central (Ahmad, 2006).

However, the practice of arranged marriage also became absorbed into these wider discourses of 'forced' marriage (Charsley, 2007). Women were represented as a product of the 'inertia of South Asian culture'; subjugated through the arranged marriage system (Ahmad, 2006). The blurring of arranged and forced marriage in policy worked to render both inherently 'backward', pathological and 'un-British'; reproducing understandings of South Asian cultural practices as antagonistic to 'British values' (Alexander, 2013). The most extreme example of the power of these stereotypes in the context of immigration enforcement was the so-called 'virginity test' involving the examination of female migrants' hymen (Smith and Marmo, 2011). This practice explicitly targeted South Asian women, relying on colonial stereotypes of the submissive, meek and virginal South Asian wife (Alexander, 2013). In 1980, this focus on 'genuine' and so-called 'sham' marriages resulted in the 'Primary Purpose Rule', which forced migrant spouses to prove that marriage was the sole purpose of their migration. However, once this rule was overturned, the discourse of 'sham' marriages only intensified. The family visa route was increasingly seen as an unregulated area of border governance through which 'non-genuine' marriages were used to access rights (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). The migrant wife was therefore depicted in a series of 'illiberal', patriarchal relationships with the migrant-citizen household which meant she was ill-suited to British life (passive, unable to speak English, 'outside' the labour market, reliant on welfare) (Charsley and Shaw, 2006).

Consequently, as Charsley et al. (2012) note, some British immigration regulations have been particularly aimed at South Asian spouses, of which the 2012 changes are an important example. Home Office statistics show that a high proportion of applicants for spouse visas come from South Asia (Charsley et al., 2012; Home Office, 2021). In its 2012 Policy Equality Statement, the Home Office acknowledged that Pakistani and Bangladeshi applicants would be disproportionately affected by the policy changes, especially as their sponsors were likely to have lower earnings than those of other nationalities. The government's analysis of a sample of cases showed that the median gross earnings of sponsors of applicants from Pakistan was £16,920 and £13,680 for Bangladeshi applicants, both well below the threshold introduced (Home Office, 2012). This racial discrimination was framed by the government as 'indirect' and 'proportionate to achieve the policy aims' (Home Office, 2012).

Further, in language around the 2012 changes, South Asian families were implicitly problematised through the invocation of 'community cohesion' discourse, which has served to 'other' Muslim communities in particular since the 2001 civil unrest in Burnley, Bradford and Oldham (Kalra and Kapoor, 2009; Samad, 2013). Couched in the need for 'integration and social cohesion, and ensuring people are not a burden on the

taxpayer’, the then Immigration Minister Damian Green (2011) stated, ‘of the family migrants granted a visa in 2004, 86 per cent of Bangladeshis and 81 per cent of Pakistanis had settled here permanently by 2009, compared with only 10 per cent of Australians and 11 per cent of New Zealanders.’ Continuing, Green claimed ‘ensuring community cohesion is not just about reducing the numbers coming to the UK; it is also about being more selective about those who stay permanently.’ The suggestion being that those who tend to ‘stay permanently’ – Bangladeshis and Pakistanis – are a problem for ‘integration and social cohesion’ and a drain on public funds. Similarly, the Home Office Policy Equality Statement (2012) on the changes stated:

The family route has been a very easy way into the UK. The current maintenance requirement [...] is inadequate to prevent migrants and sponsors becoming a burden on the welfare system and [...] inhibits proper integration. *Chain migration is a routine feature of some communities which remain insular.* [Italics ours]

The final sentence links the marriage practices of certain communities in Britain (e.g., South Asians) with both a ‘burden on the welfare system’ and the failure of ‘proper integration’. As Charsley et al. (2017) argue, the evidence base underpinning this assumption, taken for granted in much UK policy-making (Alexander, 2010), has been extremely limited.

The representations of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis contained in these excerpts are well-established in UK policy and rely heavily on a racialised vocabulary of ‘segregated communities’ and ‘parallel lives’, which has long served to position South Asian (and especially Muslim) communities as a threat to national values and unity. As the imagined site of reproduction of these so-called problematic cultural differences, the family plays an important role in these policy imaginaries. This has particular consequences for women who have been depicted as ‘animalistic ‘breeders’ undermining a national economy ravaged by austerity’ (Ali and Whitham, 2021: 206).

While there has been some scholarly attention to the 2012 family migration rules, this scholarship has predominantly drawn on policy analysis alone, raising questions about how the changes have been experienced in practice. One exception is Nehring and Sealey’s (2020) work on the effects of the MIR on ‘highly-skilled’ transnational Chinese-Western couples. However, little is known about the impact of the rules on groups targeted by them. This represents a significant gap in the literature, not least because British family migration controls have historically functioned as a way of managing South Asian families.

## Methodology

The research was part of two overlapping projects seeking to examine experiences of citizenship among British and American Bangladeshis. In the UK, 75 interviews with 120 British Bangladeshis were conducted between 2015–2017. The research sites were Luton in Bedfordshire, Tower Hamlets in London, and Aston/Smethwick in Birmingham. Interviews took the form of semi-structured dyads with parents and children ( $n = 90$ ), narrative interviews with participants over 60-years-old ( $n = 14$ ), and semi-structured interviews with civil society members ( $n = 16$ ).

Data on the family migration rules emerged in all three interview types, but most often in interviews with women, usually in the context of the mother/daughter dyads. We chose parent/child dyads because experiences of citizenship are mediated not only by ‘race’ and ethnicity but also generation. The same-sex parent-child dyads aimed to highlight issues of continuity and change over time. We were initially concerned that there may be instances when the presence of parents closed down conversations for young people. In fact, we found the opposite, particularly in the context of discussions about racism. We also found that the mother/daughter dyads opened up conversations around transnational marriage. Bringing women together in this way enabled conversations which might not have happened otherwise. After one mother/daughter dyad the interviewer was thanked for facilitating conversations that had never previously arisen in the context of busy family life. All the interviewees quoted below are women except Serag and Aftab, reflective of the degree to which conversations about marriage were enlivened by these dialogues.

No direct questions were asked about the rules but they were mentioned by participants in 16 interviews ( $n = 28$ ), the majority of which were conducted in Birmingham ( $n = 26$ ). No references to the rules were made in the interviews conducted in Luton. All interviewees quoted in this article are based in Birmingham unless otherwise stated. This variation in responses by location likely reflects the uneven geographical impact of the MIR, which disadvantages sponsors outside of London due to socio-economic disparities (APPG on Migration, 2013). The geographic discrepancy reflected socio-economic variation, as reference to the rules unsurprisingly varied by class position, as measured through income. The rules were referenced more by those on lower incomes. The geographic variation also relates to the fact that there were more first-generation migrants in the Birmingham sample ( $n = 14$  as opposed to  $n = 10$  in Tower Hamlets and  $n = 0$  in Luton). All participants were British citizens, except one who had Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Interviewees were recruited via third sector organisations from the project Steering Committee. In all field sites a sample was drawn to ensure a spread of

socio-economic backgrounds and an even spread of mothers, fathers, daughters and sons. Interviews were conducted, in English or Sylheti depending on interviewees' preferences, by one of the co-authors, a British Bangladeshi female academic. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout.

Alongside this interview data, we conducted critical discourse analysis of government documents, speeches, and media coverage around the 2012 changes. A media search was conducted through LexisNexis between 01 January, 2011 – six months prior to the family migration consultation being launched – and 31 December, 2017 (ten months after the final Supreme Court judgment on the MIR), which yielded 342 articles.

## **An 'attack' on transnationalism**

### **Transnationalism as 'threat' to the nation**

In the lead up to the 2012 changes, the Immigration Minister Damian Green stated:

We want to encourage integration, and that must be helped by a sufficient capacity to communicate in English. This is particularly important where migrant communities continue to favour marriage to a spouse from overseas rather than to a British citizen or a person already settled here.

Green here problematises transnational marriage amongst certain groups, drawing on racialised tropes of the South Asian migrant spouse who cannot speak English and fails to 'integrate'. Issues around language and marriage practices have long been connected in Home Office rhetoric. Following the 2001 disturbances in Burnley, Bradford, and Oldham, the 'Asian family' was depicted as 'importing poverty' (Guardian, 2001) through the practice of bringing wives from the subcontinent who could not speak English. South Asian wives were portrayed as responsible for perpetuating foreign cultures within the home (Alexander, 2004) and incapable of achieving financial or social independence.

Green's use of 'migrant communities' above positions later generations who engage in transnational marriage – most of whom will be British citizens – as non-citizens. The phrase 'continue to favour' suggests a preference for an outdated, backward practice, signalling that family life should be formed within the nation. Yet, as Charsley et al. (2012) note, cross-border marriages between couples from developed countries are rarely the target of restrictions.

The requirement that transnational families prove their allegiance to the British nation was also emphasized in state documents. For instance, the



Home Office family migration consultation read: ‘It is right that we test all couples’ attachment to the UK. ‘This proclamation, signalling the ‘moral economy’ (D’Aoust, 2018) of family migration policy, cast suspicion on the transnational couple. There was also an implicit sense within the Home Office consultation that ties to other countries negated transnational families’ rights to live in Britain. For example, the Danish ‘combined attachment’ requirement – which requires that transnational couples’ ‘combined attachment’ (e.g., their combined length of residence in Denmark, the presence of their family members in Denmark), must be greater than their ‘attachment’ to any other nation (Rytter, 2010) – was held up as a successful model. In the same document, the Home Office (2011) declared: ‘It is not generally a breach of Article 8 to refuse entry or remove if the family can live elsewhere.’ Transnational ties were therefore represented as abrogating rights to family life, under the European Convention on Human Rights.

The issues around transnationalism constructed in policy intersected with concerns around ‘integration’ in media discourse, resulting in an image of deceitful, burdensome, and culturally unsuitable South Asian spouses. An article in *The Daily Telegraph*, entitled ‘Crackdown on immigrant abuse of family visa system’ highlighted that ‘the majority of those [...] *using this method* are women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh’ (Italics ours). Family migration was conflated with ‘abuse’ (see also Dickson and Rosen, 2021). At the same time, and echoing Damien Green above, such articles raised nativist concerns about the perceived waning dominance of the English language in Britain. Mothers were represented as to blame for speaking ‘mother tongues’ at home, and South Asian women were represented as a drain on the welfare state. ‘Most of those arriving here under that route are women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. But many end up living with jobless or low-earners and become a burden on the benefit system’, read an article in *The Sun*. Here Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi women were rendered the welfare-liability at the heart of the 2012 changes.

### ***Deterring transnational marriage***

Turning to qualitative interviews from our research with British Bangladeshis, we now examine how this ‘attack’ on transnationalism was experienced. Interviewees who mentioned the family migration rules consistently described their deterrent effect; they were widely perceived to have contributed to a decline in transnational marriage amongst younger generations. In one narrative interview, 64-year-old Najia discussed how financial pressures had shaped attitudes towards transnational marriage amongst younger generations:

Najia: ... they used to send them to Bangladesh before [to get married], and now it’s changed. You need a lot of money.

The children in this country don't want to go to Bangladesh and they don't want to get married from anyone there because it's hard for them to make money here, if you understand? It's too hard, that's why they want to get married in this country.

Money and the challenges of earning enough in the UK are the focus of Najia's reasoning. But by referencing visits to Bangladesh she alludes to social and cultural changes too. Shaw (2000) in her study of Pakistani Muslims in Oxford noted a process of social change in practices and expectations surrounding transnational marriage, which she predicted would eventually lead to a decrease in the practice. We argue that this social change *has* occurred among British Bangladeshis, but in a tightly woven relationship with immigration restrictions. As Nazia, a 21-year-old student, and her mother Hushnara (a 44-year-old housewife) explained:

Najia: a lot of the time I think it is British Bangladeshis getting married to each other because they understand each other's way of life ... how it is, the culture in Britain and obviously the language barrier as well because a lot of them speak English, and some of them ... they can't speak proper Bengali, so the communication would be difficult there.

Nazia describes the shifting attitudes to transnational marriage shaped by cultural differences between generations. Often children explained that they would prefer a partner with the same background as their own and parents frequently commented that they had learned from previous experience that transnational marriages could be difficult. Hushnara, however, added that there would be advantages to Nazia marrying in Bangladesh because it would help retain a link with Bangladesh that had weakened over time through the deaths of close family members. And here the nation-state came back into view. She had not considered it for her daughter, 'because of the difficulties with regards to the immigration, it has made it complicated to consider getting you married to someone from Bangladesh'. Cultural and generational changes are working *alongside* family migration rules, but it is the former that have been the focus of popular discourse. As Alexander et al. (2016: 151) observe, 'the nation state thus works to transform cultural practices around marriage and family formation while simultaneously positioning these cultural practices as being outside of, and in contradistinction to, the modern nation state'.

Resha, a 64-year-old interviewee, focusses squarely on the nation-state when she explains that ‘issues with immigration and paperwork’ are ‘holding people back from getting married in Bangladesh’. This perception was shared by younger participants, such as 20-year-old Aafa:

Interviewer: How do you feel about that Aafa, could you see yourself settling with someone from Bangladesh or would they have to be a British Bangladeshi?

Aafa: British Bangladeshi.

Interviewer: Why do you think?

Aafa: Because I don't want to struggle if I get married in Bangladesh, you know, like job and all that, I don't want that headache.

For many participants, the difficulties created by the rules, particularly securing a job with the requisite income attached, were seen as too much of a ‘headache’, placing significant strain on the family as a whole. Interviewees felt this especially in relation to women:

Mahera: I think the difficulty in the immigration process has put a lot of them [parents] off because they know the onus would be on the family to support their daughters, getting a job, supporting them. I think that plays a substantial role.

Interviewer: It is interesting you mentioned mainly for girls. Do you think it is the same for boys?

Mahera: That is funny because recently I have had a few boys, they don't mind getting married to girls from Bangladesh. But I think the parents don't have that expectation now [...] There is a shift in attitude [...] their kids getting married in Bangladesh isn't even an option. I have got quite a large family in Birmingham, I have got an extended family, so it is not even an option.

Mahera (38-years-old) here talks about a variety of issues involved in this ‘shift in attitude’, such as changing expectations among parents due to a desire for compatibility discussed above. But she also talks about the changing place of family in their lives. Many participants had large extended families in the UK and fewer family members still in Bangladesh. In some cases, as in Mahera's, this rendered transnational marriage an impossibility due to the financial and emotional responsibilities to those around them, suggesting that the rules are especially problematic for non-nuclear families. While the

income threshold is harder to meet for those providing financial support to extended family members, individuals supported by their families also face difficulties in meeting the requirement, as third party support cannot generally count towards it. The MIR can thus also be understood as an ‘attack’ on non-nuclear families.

Mahera’s emphasis on daughters was typical, evincing a common feeling that the rules were more of an issue for women. This is unsurprising given the gendered nature of income inequality in the UK. Women are also more likely to have greater responsibility for childcare and other reproductive labour, making it difficult for them to meet the financial requirements of sponsorship. As discussed above, South Asian women have historically been depicted as inadequate providers, so they have always occupied a different position from men in discourse and policy regarding sponsorship. We were reminded of this by Hina, a 47-year-old woman from Birmingham, who described sponsoring her husband prior to 2012:

Hina: I needed a job and without a job, there’s no way I could sponsor him [...] although [...] In those days, the income, [...] there wasn’t a threshold for income. Now there is, you have to earn £18,600. In those days you just had to have a job and as long as it was more than the benefit level, you could bring your spouse [...] I did the housework as well, so working did not stop me from being a wife, a mum [...] while I worked, side by side, I had four young children growing up. My mum helped me with childcare because I couldn’t afford childcare [...] if I had to pay for childcare there’s no way I could have worked.

As Hina admits, even prior to the current maintenance requirement, it would have been impossible for her to sponsor her husband without childcare support from her mother. As Shutes (2017: 248) argues, the current income threshold has consequences for women’s capacities for ‘self-provisioning’ as by limiting their rights to bring non-British spouses to the UK, it also restricts their potential to increase household income through dual-earning. In the case of one of our participants, Rina – a 24-year-old woman married to a Bangladeshi national – who was subject to the MIR, the gendered dimensions of the ‘attack’ on transnationalism were especially apparent:

Rina: You have to show it for five years that you are still working, that you are still earning, but then not everyone is going to earn that much anyways if they are having children; it is difficult [...] Especially for women, if you have children, you can’t really work full time. Where are you going to leave the children?

- Interviewer: How would that be different, do you think [for a man]?
- Rina: Because I [the man] can go to work, at least full time, and the woman can look after the baby. So it will be easier [to earn enough money].

This excerpt highlights how the 2012 rules intersect with inequalities around reproductive labour, exacerbating gendered pressures, with particular implications for the possibility of transnational marriage for women. Rina's remark that 'not everyone is going to earn that much anyways', echoing other participants, reflects raced, classed, and gendered income inequalities in the UK, where Bangladeshi people experience disadvantages in the labour market and are primarily in blue-collar employment (Khan, 2020), with women facing particular difficulties (Dale et al., 2002). Further, Rina draws our attention to how the MIR and extended probationary period combine to severely restrict family life, curtailing the possibilities for British South Asian women to engage in transnational marriage *and* have children.

For others, transnational marriage was not necessarily an impossibility but was deemed too difficult or too risky. The MIR was often conceived as one of many financial impediments, with participants also mentioning the high costs of legal fees. It's important to note that in the same year that the family migration rules were changed, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 was passed, which meant free legal advice went out of scope for most immigration cases. Alongside financial and bureaucratic hurdles, some interviewees alluded to the rules interacting with other kinds of family labour involved in arranged marriages:

- Katrina: Some families will get scared as well, because no matter how much of a good job they have [...] to apply for them, you need to be earning over 18,000, so even if the guy is decent and whatnot.
- Karima: They struggle to bring them over.
- Katrina: A lot of people don't want to do the whole arranged marriages because of the fact that they might not be able to bring them over.

Finding an appropriate partner for your children is an important parental duty among many South Asian families. It involves not only the union of the two individuals but also a relation between two families, necessitating the brokering of different perspectives (Rytter, 2013). Community workers Katrina (33-years-old) and Karima (28-years-old) here suggest that families may be

nervous about exploring a transnational arranged marriage, which may involve substantial family labour (e.g., assessing whether ‘the guy is decent and whatnot’), when there are risks that the potential spouse might not be able to migrate in the end. For 61-year-old Serag, there were also other kinds of risks involved in transnational arranged marriages: ‘who wants to pay when he doesn’t marry the culture, who ... want(s) to pay when they don’t get on with each other.’ Serag suggests that the financial costs involved in making the relationship possible put additional pressures on the relationship itself, resulting in a kind of mental calculation by the family about whether the money was ‘worth’ it.

Serag’s quote also speaks to the fact that immigration controls were not the only thing deterring British Bangladeshis from marrying someone from Bangladesh. Like Nazia and Hushnara, Serag and his 33-year-old son Aftab described the ‘little cultural clashes’ they believed created problems in a transnational marriage between a British Bangladeshi and someone born and raised in Bangladesh. However, the intersection between cultural and generational change *and* immigration processes was clear:

Aftab: I think I was one of the last generations to get married in Bangladesh. It has been five, six years now simply because of the differences. The language barrier is the first one. Culture [...] simple things like watching the TV channel. I want to watch an Indian film, or I want to watch an English film. Going to eat – oh, Indian restaurant? No, Mackies? [...] I think the immigration system to sponsor in is very very expensive and the tests I almost spent near enough to £5000 in fees to get my wife [...] she only got a British passport this summer [...] and that was just the application fees [...] If I had paid the solicitor, it would have been double.

As Serag concluded, it has ‘already changed in terms of law, in terms of culture [...] putting many things together, people are marrying here’. Cultural shifts are operating in a context which has been shaped by immigration rules, and the institution of transnational marriage has been transformed.

The deterrent effect of the rules has broader ramifications for the possibilities of transnational lives for South Asian families. While we do not assume a straightforward correlation between transnational marriage and transnational practices more generally (Charsley and Bolognani, 2021), we recognise that transnational marriage may often be perceived as, and indeed function as a way to, strengthen or sustain transnational ties. Some participants expressed concerns around the consequences of declining transnational marriage as a result of immigration restrictions. For example, Piya, a 26-year-old woman in Tower Hamlets, reflected: ‘I feel like the reduction in marriage between British Bangladeshis and people from Bangladesh is going to reduce the relationship with Bangladesh, overall.’ The spectre of this waning relationship with Bangladesh highlights how immigration restrictions can work beyond their seemingly immediate functions to exert far more extensive regulation of ethnic minority communities.

## An ‘attack’ on citizenship

### Neoliberal imaginaries of citizens

Policy and media rhetoric around the 2012 rules was also characterised by neoliberal imaginaries of citizens, which framed the parameters of ‘good’ citizenship. ‘Good’ citizens were represented as those able to live ‘responsibly’ with their partners without support from others. The Home Office (2011) stated: ‘Families should be able to manage their own lives. If a British citizen or a person settled here cannot support their foreign spouse or partner, then they cannot expect the taxpayer to do it for them’. This moralising discourse reinforced the existing responsabilisation of citizens underpinning the welfare state (Cain, 2016), entrenching the nation’s concern with ‘protecting its resources’ from those not part of its ‘community of value’ (Anderson, 2013), such as the ‘undeserving poor’, a category that, as Shilliam (2018) has shown, has always been racialised. At the same time, the nation-state effectively abandoned those whose relationships transcended its borders. The inability to be economically self-sufficient was held up as a failure of citizenship and intimate life, revealing an ultimately ‘irresponsible’ citizen. Nation and family were deeply intertwined – being a ‘good’ citizen (and partner) meant espousing nativism in intimate relationships, whilst being a ‘good’ family member (and citizen) meant financial self-sufficiency, something severely limited by state controls. The rules were thus framed by the government as a moral code ‘let[ting] everyone know where they stand and mak[ing] clear what their responsibilities are’ (Home Office, 2011). The scope of (ir)responsibility was not confined to state support, but extended to assistance from other citizens too, thereby (re)producing a thoroughly individualised notion of ‘responsibility’ wedded to the ideology of the nuclear family, in which livelihoods could not be made or shared beyond the couple.

This individualising notion of citizens needing to be ‘responsible’ for themselves merged with the government’s conception of itself as ‘protecting’ citizens from themselves. The rules were justified on this paternalistic basis: ‘We do not want to see migrant families struggling to get by, living in overcrowded housing or dependent on welfare’ (Home Office, 2011). The government framed itself as not just protecting the state (from the assumed dangers of migrants draining public funds), but also saving citizens from their own recklessness.

### *Second-class citizenship*

The 2012 rules had significant repercussions for the experiences of citizenship amongst some of our participants. Some made explicit reference to a sense that the rules were racially targeted:

Serag: 'It is a deterrent. They can't very well state it as saying you can't marry a girl from Bangladesh. Okay, they got the mechanism that help that you don't.'

The policy, Serag suggests, is a mechanism through which the intimate lives of British Bangladeshis are being governed. Serag's quote speaks profoundly to the advancement of racial neoliberalism at the heart of these changes, 'which has brought a greater silencing of 'race' from structural arrangement' (Kapoor, 2011: 1043). As Goldberg (2009: 1714) argues, with the advancement of neoliberal politics, the terms of 'race' are increasingly 'dimmed, deleted, distorted', and denied, while the institutionalization of racial governance is entrenched.

Rina, who was subject to the MIR, felt that the rules discriminated against her as a woman of Bangladeshi origin. She described Bangladeshis having to provide 'proof after proof' to bring spouses to the UK and said that she did not think white British citizens would have to do the same:

Rina: ... You have to show a certain amount that you are earning. If a white British got married to someone from Bangladesh or India, they don't have to show that. If they want to bring someone else, I don't get why it is different ... I don't know. We are all British at the end of the day.

Interviewer: Then why do you think it would be different for a white British person to you, your experience?

Rina: Because from the background I am from, I am from a different country, from Bangladesh. That is probably what it is ... It is more difficult now. They are changing everything.

Nurjahan: You have to show a certain salary.

Her mother Nurjahan (43) intervenes to help explain, but this is not straightforward. While Rina's reflections may seem like a misunderstanding of the policy (the idea that it does not, in principle, affect white British citizens), such a reading would constitute a failure to recognise the very real racial discrimination that Rina feels and experiences as a Muslim, British-Bangladeshi woman. Rina understands well who the policy targets. She describes feeling that she is treated as though she is from elsewhere, despite having arrived in the country at 9-months-old and possessing a British passport. We can see Rina's struggle with the complexity of citizenship, which she both recognises as a status of formal equality ('We are all



British at the end of the day’) and as something felt and lived in a way which may contradict that equality. The MIR was experienced by some of our participants as underscoring the lesser status of their citizenship, and, ultimately, their exclusion and non-belonging within the nation.

Our participants’ experiences of citizenship resonate with other interviewees’ discussions of discrimination in relation to a range of public services. These feelings of second-class citizenship are not unique to immigration policy, but constitute part of the fabric of everyday life for racialised individuals in the UK. Indeed, many participants felt a strong sense of the precarity of their formal citizenship as Muslims of dual heritage (Redclift and Rajina, 2021) in the context of the British state’s growing powers around citizenship deprivation (Kapoor, 2018) – which have been significantly expanded by the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (Webber, 2022) – and the increasing policing of Muslim citizens across Europe (Kundnani, 2015). The experiences of discrimination around the family migration rules that we’ve discussed should thus be understood as an instance of a more systemic degradation of citizenship amongst British Muslims, produced at the intersection of anti-migrant and anti-Muslim discourses and policies (Redclift et al., 2022)

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the 2012 family migration rules were an ‘attack’ on both transnationalism and citizenship, one that was mainly targeted at, and experienced by, South Asians. In making our case, we have interrogated the relationship between immigration policy and the lived experience of communities affected by it. Departing from existing scholarship on the restrictions, we keep these two dimensions in view, enriching understandings of both how the rules aimed to engineer family life amongst ethnic minority communities in Britain *and* some of the social and cultural shifts in transnational practices and citizenship they have produced.

We have sought to address a gap in the literature around how these changes were experienced by those at the sharp end of them, arguing that, through their interaction with generational changes and cultural factors, they have had a significant impact on transnational marriage amongst British Bangladeshis. But, we have also pointed out that the impact of the rules on transnationalism exceeds the boundaries of marriage; closing down transnational possibilities at the level of the individual, the extended family, and the wider community.

Alongside this discussion of transnationalism, we have considered how the rules work to govern the citizenship of British South Asians. The fact that this policy is a thinly veiled attempt to use financial status in place of national and racial quotas was not lost on those it targeted. It is a ‘mechanism’, as Serag put it, which enables the state to limit the transnational practices of some people,

but not all. Consequently, some of our participants experienced these restrictions as confirming their second-class citizenship, something we understand as part of a broader degradation of citizenship amongst British Bangladeshis in Britain, who increasingly feel their everyday exclusion in the public realm and the fragility of their formal citizenship. In the context of transnational marriage, citizens racialised as South Asian and Muslim are told they need to take responsibility for their own lives, but they also need to be protected from themselves, and the ‘bad choices’ through which they might become dependent on welfare. The contradictions are hidden in a ‘common sense’ which reinforces racialised tropes, without ‘race’ ever needing to be named. Racial neoliberalism here works to reduce the processes and decisions involved to a struggle between generations (a ‘culture clash’), which ‘displaces social differences into a privatised familial opposition’ (Lowe, 1996: 66) outside of, and in contradistinction to, the modern nation-state.

For many years policy has been replete with an association between transnationalism and citizenship, very often through assumptions about the effect of transnational marriage on integration. But it is only in recent years that this has been scrutinized in academic research (Charsley et al., 2017; Redclift and Rajina, 2021). This article aims to pull out one element of the relationship between transnationalism and citizenship which remains neglected, that is the degree to which structural racism in the transnational domain (including the UK state’s suspicion towards, and surveillance of, the transnational practices of Muslims in particular) reproduces structural racism in the field of citizenship *and vice versa*. As our participants explain, an attack on transnationalism *is* an attack on citizenship, and racialised citizenship produces an uneven ability to lead transnational lives. The nation-state is at the centre of these processes, and through them, the institutionalization of racial governance is reinforced.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to the Swadhinata Trust, the Community Connect Foundation, Brick Lane Circle and to the interviewees for their time, generosity and enthusiasm for this research. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers whose extremely thoughtful comments improved the piece.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the

Leverhulme Trust [PLP-2014-221]; and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [ES/N000986/1] [ES/N000986/2].

## References

- Ahmad F (2006) The scandal of ‘arranged marriages’ and the pathologisation of Asian families. In: Ali N, Kalra VS and Sayyid S (eds) *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain*. London: Hurst and Co, pp. 272–288.
- Alexander C (2004) Imagining the Asian gang: Ethnicity, masculinity and youth after ‘the riots’. *Critical Social Policy* 24(4): 526–549.
- Alexander C (2010) Culturing poverty? Ethnicity, religion, gender and social disadvantage among South Asian communities in the UK. In: Chant S (ed) *International Handbook of Gender and Poverty*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 272–277.
- Alexander C (2013) Marriage, migration, multiculturalism: Gendering ‘the Bengal diaspora’. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39(3): 333–351.
- Alexander C, Chatterji J and Jalais A (2016) *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration*.
- Ali N and Whitham B (2021) Racial capitalism, islamophobia, and austerity. *International Political Sociology* 15: 190–211.
- All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration (2013) *Report of the Inquiry into New Family Migration Rules*. London: APPG on Migration.
- Anderson B (2013) *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Anitha S (2008) No recourse, no support: State policy and practice towards south Asian women facing domestic violence in the UK. *The British Journal of Social Work* 40(2): 462–479.
- Bettiga G (2018) What are the financial requirements for UK spouse and partner visas? Available at: [https://www.freemovement.org.uk/appendix-fm-financial-requirements/#Exceptional\\_circumstances](https://www.freemovement.org.uk/appendix-fm-financial-requirements/#Exceptional_circumstances) (accessed 16 May 2021).
- Cain R (2016) Responsibilising recovery: Lone and low-paid parents, universal credit and the gendered contradictions of UK welfare reform. *British Politics* 11: 488–507.
- Charsley K (2007) Risk, trust, gender and transnational cousin marriage among British Pakistanis. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30(6): 1117–1131.
- Charsley K and Bolognani M (2021) Marrying ‘in’/marrying ‘out’? Blurred boundaries in British Pakistani marriage choices. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(2): 361–378.
- Charsley K and Shaw A (2006) South Asian transnational marriages in comparative perspective. *Global Networks* 6(4): 331–344.
- Charsley K, Van Hear N, Benson M, et al. (2012) Marriage-related migration to the UK. *International Migration Review* 46(4): 861–890.
- Charsley K, Bolognani M and Spencer S (2017) Marriage migration and integration: Interrogating assumptions in academic and policy debates. *Ethnicities* 17(4): 469–490.

- Dale A, Fieldhouse E, Shaheen N, et al. (2002) The labour market prospects of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. *Work, Employment and Society* 16(1): 5–25.
- D'Aoust A-M (2018) A moral economy of suspicion: Love and marriage migration management practices in the United Kingdom. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36: 40–59.
- Dickson E and Rosen R (2021) Punishing those who do the wrong thing: Enforcing destitution and debt through the UK's family migration rules. *Critical Social Policy* 41(4): 545–565.
- Goldberg DT (2009) *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Green D (2011) *Immigration: Damian Green's Speech on Family Migration*. London: Home Office.
- Griffiths M and Yeo C (2021) The UK's hostile environment: Deputising immigration control. *Critical Social Policy* 41(4): 521–544.
- Guardian (2001) MP Urges Review of Immigration Law. *Guardian*, 12 September 2001.
- Home Office (2011) *Family Migration: A Consultation*. London: Home Office.
- Home Office (2012) *Policy Equality Statement: Family Migration*. London: Home Office.
- Home Office (2021) *National Statistics: Why Do People Come to the UK? For Family Reasons*. London: Home Office.
- Huddleston T (2012) Can't Buy Me Love *Migrant Integration Policy Index*. (MIPEX Blog), 6 July. Available at: <http://www.mipex.eu/blog/cant-buy-me-love> (accessed 13 March 2013).
- Kalra VS and Kapoor N (2009) Interrogating segregation, integration and the community cohesion agenda. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35(9): 1397–1415.
- Kapoor N (2011) The advancement of racial neoliberalism in Britain. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(6): 1028–1046.
- Kapoor N (2018) *Deport, Deprive, Extradite: 21st Century State Extremism*. London: Verso.
- Khan O (2020) *The Colour of Money: How Racial Inequalities Obstruct a Fair and Resilient Economy*. London: Runnymede Trust.
- Kofman E, Lukes S, Meetoo V, et al. (2008) *Family Migration to United Kingdom: Trends, Statistics and Policies*. Vienna: BMWF/ICMPD.
- Kundnani A (2015) *The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*. London: Verso.
- Lowe L (1996) *Immigrant Acts*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.
- Migration Advisory Committee (2011) *Review of the Minimum Income Requirement for Sponsorship Under the Family Migration Route*. London: Migration Advisory Committee.
- Redclift V, Rajina F and Rashid N (2022) The Burden of Conviviality: British Bangladeshi Muslims navigating diversity in London, Luton and Birmingham. *Sociology* 56(6): 1159–1175.
- Redclift VM and Rajina FB (2021) The hostile environment, Brexit, and 'reactive-' or 'protective transnationalism'. *Global Networks* 21(1): 196–214.
- Rytter M (2010) The family of Denmark' and 'the Aliens': Kinship images in danish integration politics. *Ethnos* 75(3): 301–322.

- Rytter M (2013) *Family Upheaval: Generation, Mobility and Relatedness among Pakistani Migrants in Denmark*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Samad Y (2013) Community cohesion without parallel lives in Bradford. *Patterns of Prejudice* 47(3): 269–287.
- Sealey DNaC (2020) Intimate citizenship and the tightening of migration controls in the United Kingdom. *Social Policy Admin* 54: 427–440.
- Shaw A (2000) *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani Families in Britain*. London: Routledge.
- Shilliam R (2018) *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing.
- Shutes I (2017) Controlling migration: the gender implications of work-related conditions in restricting rights to residence and social benefits. In: Hudson J, Needham C and Heins E (eds) *Social Policy Review 29: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 243–258.
- Sirriyeh A (2015) ‘All you need is love and £18,600’: Class and the new UK family migration rules. *Critical Social Policy* 35(2): 228–247.
- Smith E and Marmo M (2011) Uncovering the ‘virginity testing’ controversy in the national archives: The intersectionality of discrimination in British immigration history. *Gender & History* 23(1): 147–165.
- Sumption M and Vargas-Silva C (2019) Love is not all you need: Income requirement for visa sponsors of foreign family members. *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy* 2: 62–76.
- Turner J (2015) The family migration visa in the history of marriage restrictions. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17: 623–643.
- Webber F (2022) The racialisation of British citizenship. *Race & Class* 64(2): 75–93.
- Wray H, Kofman E and Simic A (2021) Subversive citizens: Using EU free movement law to bypass the UK’s rules on marriage migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(2): 447–463.
- Yuval-Davis N, Anthias F and Kofman E (2005) Secure borders and safe haven and the gendered politics of belonging: Beyond social cohesion. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(3): 513–535.

## Author biographies

**Eve Dickson** is a Research Fellow in the Social Research Institute at UCL. She works across cultural, psychosocial, gender, and childhood studies. Her current research is concerned with the relationship between immigration and welfare controls, particularly the ways in which restrictions on access to social support are used to govern mobility. She is Co-Investigator on the ESRC-funded project ‘Social reproduction in the shadows: Making lives with no recourse to public funds’ (2023–2026). Recent publications have appeared in *The Entangled Legacies of Empire: Race, Finance & Inequality* and *Families, Relationships and Societies*.

**Victoria Redclift** is Associate Professor of Political Sociology at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, and the Social Research Institute at UCL. She works on the sociology of migration, with particular focus on citizenship and political exclusion. She is the author of *Statelessness*

*and Citizenship: Camps and the Creation of Political Space* (Routledge, 2013), and co-author of *New Racial Landscapes: Contemporary Britain and the Neoliberal Conjecture* (Routledge, 2015).

**Fatima Rajina** is currently a Senior Legacy in Action Research Fellow at the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre, De Montfort University. Her work focuses on British Bangladeshi Muslims and the changing landscape of race, dress and language. Recent publications have appeared in *Sociology* and *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*.