The London School of Economics and Political Science

THE POLITICS OF ETHICAL SELF-BECOMING

An ethnographic study of South Asian women's (re)positioning
in broken transnational marriages
in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This thesis draws on 18 months of person-centred, ethnographic fieldwork and ongoing contact exploring broken transnational marriages, domestic abuse and destitution experienced by South Asian brides migrating to the United Kingdom without natal family in proximity. It interrogates the process of their ethical self-becoming as they persevere and "keep going" through several challenging life events. To investigate self-becoming, I developed "Ethical (Re)positioning" – an analytical tool with a cartographic approach to examine intertwining forces shaping self-becoming over time and space. It interrogates how women navigate interweaving dynamics of familial, legal, social and medical structures, interpersonal relationships, thoughts, and emotions in gendered migration.

"Ethical (Re)positioning" illuminates migrant brides' challenging (re)positions as they await delayed spousal visas, experience domestic abuse, face deportation, fight for rights to UK residency, struggle with poor language and digital skills, and achieve economic independence. It emphasises their predicaments, concerns, doubts, fears and "multiple ethical dilemmas" in and across their (re)positions. It reveals their "carceral escapes" whereby escaping one challenging (re)position often leads to new controlling social, legal, familial, or economic structures. This thesis argues that ethical self-becoming is a shifting, non-linear, reflective and reactionary process across (re)positions, unfolding within life challenges and devotional practices, with variable outcomes, where joy, faith, hope, despair, courage, and forbearance are emotions and practices.

This thesis challenges the assumption of supportive kin and community networks within South Asian transnational marriages. It refines theories of Muslim subjectivity within the anthropology of Islam, which often centre on ethical self-cultivation shaped through formalised practices. It revises the concept of "moral breakdown" in the anthropology of ethics, which overlooks people's experiences of "multiple ethical dilemmas" across complex ethical (re)positions, where returning to an unreflective state of everyday moral dispositions is rare. This thesis offers a novel analytical approach to studying gender, migration, kinship, and Muslim female subjectivity.

For the women who trusted and opened their hearts and lives to me.
For the women who never give up and whose trust in the Almighty never ceases.

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Fatima's Journey

Fatima hails from a small town in Pakistan. Her father died when she was young; her mother earned a modest living by taking on menial jobs. When she was nearly 30 years old and still unmarried, her mother accepted a marriage proposal through a marriage broker to Habib, a British South Asian man living in the United Kingdom. After an Islamic marriage performed in Pakistan, Fatima migrated to the United Kingdom on a spousal visa. In her marital home, she lived in a joint family system[1] with her husband, brother-in-law, his wife, and elderly mother-in-law. After arriving, Fatima quickly realized that her husband was already in a long-term relationship with a British Asian woman. He spent most of his time with this woman while Fatima lived in a situation of domestic servitude, obliged to care for her mother-in-law, who suffered from poor health. In addition to taking responsibility for the full-time care of her mother-in-law, her family forced Fatima to undertake all the cleaning and cooking tasks. She was not allowed to share the same food as the rest of the family, nor was she permitted to eat with them. When Fatima's husband visited her, he was rude, physically and sexually inconsiderate, and offensive. He gave her no money for personal expenses. Fatima soon realized that her husband had married her only to care for his mother and bear him children because his long-term partner was unable to conceive.

As time passed, Fatima's marital hardships became unbearable, and finally, she ran away and reported her case to the police. Unbeknown to her, owing to the United Kingdom's stringent immigration rules, Fatima then faced deportation back to Pakistan. She explained that she did not wish to return to Pakistan, nor did she want to seek support from her local community because of her fear of being subject to gossip, stigma, and the shame of a broken marriage. In the view of Fatima's family, she simply needed to tolerate, adjust, and live within the expectations and rules of her marital home. Fatima knew that if people found out about her broken marriage, they would look down on her, and her family's reputation would be tainted. As a single woman facing these stigmas, settling and living in her natal homeland would be socially and economically challenging, which she and her family dreaded. Unaware of the United Kingdom's immigration procedures, Fatima had not intentionally collected evidence of her abuse. As a result, the UK Home Office rejected her case on the grounds of insufficient proof. Fatima faced an overwhelming hurdle, which she needed to surmount to avoid deportation back to her home country.

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[1] Common in South Asia, a joint family system involves multiple generations – such as grandparents, parents, children, and extended relatives – living together in a single household or nearby. It features shared responsibilities, pooled resources, patriarchal structures, and intergenerational living, alongside social and emotional support and expectations. However, it can also lead to conflicts, power struggles, a lack of privacy, and inter-generational differences.

Voices Across Borders: Ten Migrant South Asian Brides in Three UK Cities

This thesis explores the recurring challenges encountered by brides from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan – collectively referred to as 'South Asian' women, who migrated to the United Kingdom following their marriages to British South Asian men.

Alongside Fatima, I shall also describe the experiences of Irum and Shazia, both of whom, originating from small towns in Pakistan, entered forced marriages with their UK-based first cousins in their late teens. Also covered are the experiences of Lubna, who was in her early twenties, who, hailing from a city in Pakistan, entered a forced marriage to a close family friend in the United Kingdom. In addition, the thesis will introduce the experiences of Farah and Razia, originally from cities in Bangladesh, who both entered arranged marriages in their late teens. Saira and Geeta, from small towns in India, also feature, having entered arranged marriages through online platforms in their late twenties. Furthermore, I shall introduce Bilquis, from a city in Pakistan, and Aisha, from a small town in Pakistan, who migrated to the United Kingdom on student visas in their early thirties and twenties, respectively. In the United Kingdom, Bilquis entered a marriage with a UK-based South Asian man through an introduction during her early thirties. Aisha entered an arranged marriage with her UK-based first cousin in her early twenties.

This study spans 18 months of fieldwork, from September 2018 to March 2020, and is based on ongoing relationships with the women mentioned above, who continue to live in three UK cities. Fatima lives in an old, less ethnically diverse market town. The other women live in two ethnically diverse cities, one of which is a large, diverse city in the United Kingdom. Except for three women, the others arrived with poor English language and digital skills, no work experience, and little or no expectations of entering paid work in the United Kingdom. I met Aisha, Bilquis, Lubna, and Fatima while volunteering at a national refugee centre in 2016. They stayed in touch with me after we left the centre's services, intermittently reaching out for support with mental health issues, legal struggles, and challenging housemate dynamics. They joined my research project when I began the fieldwork stage. Aisha introduced me to Irum. Shazia, Irum's friend, joined the research project after hearing about it from Irum and getting to know me over the course of a few months.

To recruit more women during my fieldwork, I volunteered as an English teacher at a local women's centre for 2 months. There, I met Farah, who agreed to join my project 6 weeks after I began teaching her. Later, her friend Razia, whom I met regularly, decided to participate once she felt confident in my character and intentions. I met Saira and Geeta through their solicitor, whom I had contacted for advice after Fatima received her first rejection of her immigration application. The solicitor introduced me to Saira and Geeta, whose cases closely aligned with my research. Both women initially agreed to participate, providing me with nine Muslim women and one Hindu woman as potential participants. Ultimately, however, only Saira consented to be included in the study. Geeta withdrew out of concern that her in-laws might use her participation against her in their ongoing child custody case. As a result, this thesis includes data exclusively relating to Muslim women.

This study centres on these ten South Asian women's experiences of migrating alone to the United Kingdom from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Like Fatima, they all entered marriages with

British South Asian men. During their marriages, they experienced domestic abuse and transnational marriage breakdowns and faced the threat of deportation back to their natal homelands. This thesis examines questions of ethical self-becoming in relation to how individuals grow and change through their experiences, interactions, and reflections. As such, it seeks to contribute to the discussion that highlights the scope of socialization and the repetition of norms, everyday violence, rituals, daily communications, migration, ethnicity, kinship and affinity, sorcery, healing, connection with non-humans, and the company of others (Butler 1990; 1993; Das 2007; Donnelly 2022; Gutiérrez Garza 2013; Mahmood 2005; 2012; Retsikas 2012; Solomon 2012). This thesis studies processes of self-becoming in the face of challenging experiences, as well as the multiple ethical dilemmas leading to shifts in self-becoming. I shall be guided by one central question: what processes of ethical self-becoming do Muslim South Asian women face in broken transnational marriages in the United Kingdom as they navigate and respond to ethical dilemmas and structural constraints across multiple challenging life events?

Thesis Overview

In this study, I shall investigate the interlocutors' experiences of ethical self-becoming as they navigate life's challenges through consecutive complex life events without the support of their natal family nearby before proceeding to settle as single women, living on benefits and transitioning to independent living through employment in the United Kingdom. During this period, the women distance themselves from their community networks owing to a sense of shame and stigma. In some cases, they keep their distance from family networks to avoid being discovered by their husbands or forced by their natal families to return to their marital homes. Despite building other relationships, they find that some are supportive while others are toxic.

To examine the politics of my interlocutors' process of ethical self-becoming, I developed the 'ethical (re)positioning' conceptual framework. Rooted in the cartographic approach, it provides a means to examine the temporal, spatial, and interweaving forces that shape self-becoming. I have utilised the notion of 'positioning' (Holland & Leander 2004), which refers to pivotal social and psychological moments that influence each other in a person's position. I have reconceptualized it as '(re)positioning' to indicate the multiple positions my interlocutors occupied in their journeys across time and space. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of the social and psychological dimensions of experiences that shape the process of self-becoming as women are (re)positioned across multiple life events. To study an individual's subjectivity over time, that is, their thoughts, sentiments, and embodied sensibilities, and, in particular, their sense of self and self-world relations, I apply Holland & Leander's (2004) metaphor of lamination. Lamination refers to the hybrid social and psychological entities created by layering experiences or wrapping layers of experiences encountered in and across (re)positions.

To understand how these women navigated challenging periods of repeated (re)positioning, lasting 3 or more years, I draw on Vigh's (2009) concept of social navigation. Here, navigation is understood not as a journey along a stable path but rather as a process of moving through changing, unsettled environments (Vigh 2009). In a social context, navigation is understood as a movement within a constantly shifting environment that is shaped by various forces, interactions,

and authorities – social actors, institutions, and structures – that influence, engage, and move people as they progress through their journeys.

In this thesis, I therefore adopt the 'ethical (re)positioning' analytical approach, which draws on ideas of positioning, lamination (Holland & Leander 2004), and social navigation (Vigh 2009). This allows me to examine my interlocutors' process of ethical self-becoming across various (re)positions through experiences of migration, transnational marital breakdowns, legal and familial challenges, and the process of settling in the United Kingdom as single, divorced women working towards independent living.

Examining the lives of these ten women from the perspective of 'ethical (re)positioning' has highlighted the relentless, unsettling (re)positioning they have faced in their transnational marriages and subsequent family breakdowns. The process began in their home countries, where they were positioned as young women in search of marriage. After their marriages, they were (re)positioned as wedded women striving for a 'good marriage' while sometimes facing long delays (1-7 years) with their spousal visa applications. This approach also illustrates how, following their marital breakdown and separation, the women found themselves labelled as 'separated' in the United Kingdom and then positioned as victims of domestic abuse (a term used in legal contexts). Marital breakdown and separation led to their (re)positioning in an insecure immigration status in the United Kingdom and facing deportation back to their natal homelands. They were then (re)positioned as asylum seekers or women seeking indefinite leave to remain (ILR) in the United Kingdom.

After enduring lengthy and difficult immigration battles, these women eventually secured the legal right to remain in the United Kingdom. Despite this, however, they often found themselves destitute and homeless, being (re)positioned into new categories of identification. Ultimately, they settled in the United Kingdom and were (re)positioned as single women, either divorced or separated, living alone. They survived on benefits while residing in single-occupancy accommodation or in rooms within multiple-occupancy accommodation shared with others they did not know, provided by the local council. They then had to navigate the transition from living on welfare to finding employment. This framework highlights that each (re)positioning gave rise to a complex layering – a dense lamination of predicaments, concerns, doubts, and fears – emotions that shaped how the women responded or reacted to the challenges they faced in each new (re)position.

By analysing the data through this framework and following Moran, Turner & Schliehe (2018), who understand 'carceral' as an experience characterized by detriment, confiscation, or a loss of potentiality and intentions of harmful restrictions, another dimension was added to my interlocutors' experiences in and across their various (re)positionings. I term these experiences 'carceral escapes'. I use this to highlight that the experience of the carceral is deeply embedded in their complex lives and explore what happens when women escape out of one (re)position. What I have discovered is that, all too often, an apparent 'escape' from the carceral condition could involve the individual's subjection to new carceral regimes. Furthermore, 'carceral escapes' illuminates how the carceral seeps into the very fabric of women's escapes, carrying the repercussions of their preceding carceral contexts into the next stage. Using this concept, I shall

explore how the carceral is embedded and experienced in and across temporalities spanning multiple geopolitical, institutional, familial, social, economic, medical, and legal spaces and life transitions.

Second, by interrogating the data through the framework of 'ethical repositioning', I highlight that, throughout their challenging (re)positionings within legal, familial and social dynamics, women like Fatima face what I term 'multiple ethical dilemmas'. These ethical dilemmas entail a complex process of ethical decision-making, where ethical action does not always return women to an unreflective, everyday moral state (Zigon 2007). Instead, after being forced to make tough ethical decisions in the face of death threats, domestic servitude, deportation, and destitution, a return to a state of unreflective morality (Zigon 2007) proves unlikely. Even if they seek comfort and familiarity, this is rarely a possibility; instead, the outcomes of ethical action in the face of 'multiple moral predicaments' are unpredictable.

By studying the lives of women such as Fatima through these concepts, I shall argue that these women's ethical self-becoming projects are reflective and reactive to challenging life events based on individual Muslim subjectivities. I shall seek to demonstrate that this is a shifting, non-linear process that unfolds within the challenges of life and devotion. The outcomes are variable, with hope, despair, courage, and forbearance representing both the effects and the practices through which women strive to 'keep going', navigating the intertwining dynamics of social, legal, familial, and social structures, their complex, layered feelings, their 'carceral' escapes, and multiple moral predicaments.

By applying the 'ethical (re)positioning' framework to an examination of the lives of women such as Fatima, I seek to make three key contributions. First, I uncover various underexplored dimensions of South Asian transnational marriage and family breakdowns, challenging normative assumptions regarding the typical trajectories of such breakdowns. Existing scholarship predominantly focuses on the arrangements of transnational marriages, the causes of their breakdown, divorce processes, and how kinship structures are reconfigured within kin and community networks (Charsley 2013; Qureshi 2016; Shaw 2000). This thesis reveals that, within South Asian contexts, the prevailing focus on '*biradari*' (kinship and community) has frequently overshadowed the experiences of those who, in the absence of, or with a sparsity of, natal family and community networks, face life alone in their host countries. I shall demonstrate that the dissolution of transnational marriages precipitates severe consequences, including deportation, destitution, homelessness, job insecurity, isolation, and mental health challenges. These issues have been poorly investigated and often overlooked, and this thesis seeks to address this gap.

Second, I shall refine theories of Muslim subjectivity based on the anthropology of Islam by demonstrating that ethical subjectivity is not solely shaped by a deliberate process of self-cultivation achieved through formal learning, prescribed practices, and behaviours leading to either coherent or fragmented subjectivities (Abenante 2014; Akhtar 2014; Al-deen 2020; Gökarıksel 2009; Janson 2016; Mahmood 2001; 2012; Schielke 2009; 2022; Schulz 2008; Shannon 2004). Instead, I argue that ethical self-becoming takes place in a non-linear fashion as part of the challenges of life and devotion, with variable outcomes. This process is shaped by individuals navigating a dynamic environment composed of multiple forces, interactions, and influences,

including complex legal, familial, and social structures. Ethical self-becoming is also the result of accumulated experiences as individuals endure and respond to challenging life transitions.

Finally, this study contributes to the anthropology of ethics by highlighting the recurrent ethical challenges women face across different times and spaces. Here, morality and ethics do not merely involve a return to an unreflective, everyday moral disposition (Zigon 2007). Instead, they involve an intentional act of 'keeping going' amid constant (re)positionings, where a return to unreflective morality is rare. Even when women strive for comfort and familiarity, such outcomes remain elusive, as the results of ethical action in the face of ongoing 'multiple moral predicaments' are often unpredictable.

I shall now address how I arrived at this research topic, the ethical considerations underpinning my work, and the details of the fieldwork processes undertaken.

Positioning the Anthropologist: Positionality, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

The anthropologist: Acknowledging the researcher's positionality

After completing my MSc in Anthropology, I studied Refugee Care to acquire the skills to work with asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. The course director advised me to gain practical experience and referred me to a national refugee centre internship. Given my postgraduate training as a life coach, I was placed in their therapeutic services to emotionally support women clients. As the only Urdu-speaking member of the staff, I offered support to more than twenty women, many from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, facing issues of deportation owing to marital breakdowns or transnational trafficking. Along with one-to-one support, I assisted with seven group therapy sessions attended by fifteen women from different nationalities. I volunteered at the refugee centre for over 15 months before commencing my project. During this time, I also provided emotional support to community members who had recently arrived from Afghanistan and Syria.[2]

Having arrived in the United Kingdom from South Asia myself through an arranged marriage at the age of 19, some 30 years ago, with no family in the country, I encountered similarities and differences in these women's accounts that connected and separated our experiences. Their stories moved me deeply. While they were unlike anything I had heard before, I nonetheless sensed certain parallels with my own story. I had a strong desire to help and suggested contacting their families to explain their challenges. However, the women advised me that this would be futile. Despite this, I felt compelled to act on what I had learned. We agreed that I would research this phenomenon

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[2] I am a member of the Shia Nizari Ismaili branch of Islam, which has a community of approximately 15,000 in the UK. In 2019, His Highness the Aga Khan appointed my husband as President of the Ismaili community for the UK and Europe (excluding Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland). He holds this role voluntarily. As his wife, I frequently engage with newly arrived members from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Tajikistan. Through these interactions and our endeavours to improve their quality of life, I have gained insights into their settlement challenges and how they navigate life in the West.

with their support and fulfil their desire to tell their stories. I felt as though this topic had come to me, which motivated me to explore it further as a doctoral research project.

During my fieldwork, I volunteered at a local women's centre, offering life coaching to three women who had experienced domestic abuse (a term they used) and were seeking to re-enter the job market. After completing my fieldwork, I volunteered for 15 months at Refuge, a national domestic abuse helpline. There, I spoke to women from various backgrounds and age groups who were dealing with complex physical and psychological domestic challenges. These women sought to understand whether their experiences were domestic abuse and how to manage their situations. In addition, I bring counselling and life coaching skills, foundational training in systemic practice, and a shared background with my interlocutors to this project.

As previously mentioned, I am a Muslim woman who migrated to the United Kingdom at the age of 19 as part of an arranged marriage. I came without completing an undergraduate education. Since then, I have lived with my in-laws in a joint family system. I have no natal family in the United Kingdom. I was not expected to engage in paid work. Instead, I dedicated my time to being a 'full-time' mother. Once our four children had started school, I primarily spent my time assisting with the family business or volunteering in the local community. Like my interlocutors, my marriage required considerable 'marriage work', necessitating considerable personal effort to adapt to and conform with my husband's and in-laws' familial expectations, often at significant personal sacrifice and without emotional support. This necessity shaped my behaviour of submission and conformity within the marriage. My natal family's belief that returning home as a divorcee was not an option, owing to the shame and stigma it would bring upon me and my family, as judged by our community, reinforced my behaviours within the marriage. I believe a divorcee's life to be emotionally, economically, and socially challenging, with limited prospects for remarriage and economic independence. In my marriage, I struggled to overcome my personal and structural constraints.

I lived in India and Pakistan before migrating to the United Kingdom. While I could be considered a 'native' ethnographer, I know that such a term can suggest a misleading sense of authenticity (Narayan 1993: 672). I understand my interlocutors' social norms, values, and language. My life experiences and background in these South Asian countries have equipped me with a deeper understanding of my interlocutors' contexts, facilitating close connections through geographical familiarity and our everyday language, Urdu, which we spoke during the fieldwork. However, I am not 'authentically' Pakistani or Indian.

I shall outline the ethical considerations underpinning this study in the following section.

Navigating ethical considerations: Reflections on ethics in practice

In carrying out this research, cognisant of my seniority to my interlocuters in age, life experience, education, academic status, and familiarity with bureaucratic systems, I managed my relationships with care. In Aisha, Bilquis, Lubna, and Asma's cases, our relationship strengthened through the emotional support I offered them whilst volunteering at a national refugee centre. Even after I left, they continued to seek my help with immigration issues, emotional matters, and voluntary

work, which built shared trust between us. This trust continued during the research period. Others felt comfortable through mutually trusted contacts (Smith 2009), such as Saira and Geeta, after being introduced by their solicitor and Irum because Aisha introduced her to me. I had taught Farah English for six weeks before she felt comfortable to participate. Shazia and Razia joined once they felt confident, having come to know me through Irum and Farah.

Aware of the intense struggles they had endured, I prioritised creating safety and trust. To foster empathy and reduce hierarchy, at moments I felt were right, I shared selective parts of my own story – struggling as a young bride, challenges of living with in-laws in a traditional household, and caring for the home – without oversharing. Knowing our shared challenges helped strengthen our relationships. My life coaching training taught me the value of silence to create space for other to reflect. To convey my engagement and empathy, I maintained an open, attentive posture without discomfort, impatience, or judgment, and I never pushed for information. I also spent time simply 'hanging out' so that my presence was not associated solely with data collection. We planned meetings around activities – cooking, going to the park or a coffee shop, and tasks related to establishing their lives as single women in the UK. I offered support only after they confirmed they wanted me involved. I encouraged them to take the lead in tasks such as filling out forms, asking questions, or planning journeys, reducing dependence and build confidence. [3]

I kept communication open by providing my phone number and maintained strict confidentiality, never cross-sharing information. This openness encouraged them to speak without fear of gossip or judgment, and over time, I became a source of safety and trust, which carries on till today. To affirm their value and agency, I let them lead decision-making and planning. The effectiveness of this approach became evident when Shazia and Razia agreed to participate – Razia after observing my relationship with Farah, and Shazia after hearing about me from Irum.

I did not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths (Patton 2002: 51 cited in Smith 2009: 65). Instead, I sought to represent the experiences of migrant women in broken transnational marriages through their own voices (Abu-Lughod 1993), while avoiding assumptions or asking questions that reflect my own biases. Rather than collecting full life stories, a method that involves gathering the truth of the [story] telling versus a telling of the truth (Frank 1995), I gathered fragments of information across the fieldwork period, piecing them together and noting how they were revisited later. This allowed me to identify themes and discrepancies without direct confrontation. All narratives were collected during fieldwork; information given before was excluded unless repeated or referred to during the research. Where possible, I cross-checked accounts with legal documents and corroborating information from friends.

Throughout my research, I diligently maintained 'narrative humility' (DasGupta 2008: 980-1), adopting non-judgmental acceptance toward my interlocutors' testimonies, remaining mindful that some of the data stemmed from subjective accounts shaped by memory and personal perspective. I consciously avoided being 'seduced' by what I heard (Robbins 2013) and losing critical judgment.

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[3] My coaching training keeps me vigilant about avoiding dependence and fostering independence and self-reliance. This awareness informs all my interactions and practice.

Instead, I focused on understanding and evaluating the women's actions, challenges, resilience, and diverse subjectivity in facing challenges and hardship. I followed Hollan's (2001) person-centred approach, keeping my primary focus on 'how the individual's psychological and subjective experiences both shape and are shaped by social and cultural processes' (Hollan 2001: 48). I also sought to understand my interlocutors' pressing concerns in their everyday lives 'from the point of view of the acting, intending, and attentive subject' (Hollan 2001: 48-9), and uncover what was at stake for these women on a daily basis. This required careful consideration and was not an easy task.

To safeguard participants from potential harm and in line with best practices, I anonymised names, altered personal details, and omitted ages and locations (Sullivan & Kane 2004: 605-10). I ensured voluntary and informed consent by reiterating the aims of the project over the first three months and periodically thereafter (Sullivan & Kane 2004: 610). I explained how academic research is shared, showing books and articles, and emphasising confidentiality. I prepared for the possibility of toxic or unsafe family environments by seeking guidance from the London School of Economics (LSE) PhD Academy, who connected me with a risk mitigation expert. I was trained to recognise signs of danger, such as changes in atmosphere, consent, or third-party influence. I was advised to trust my instincts, leave if unsure, carry a personal alarm and share my whereabouts with a trusted contact.

Despite these precautions, I was unprepared for the abuse, threats, and fear I encountered. Some women attempted self-harm, and one even named me as her next of kin. These experiences drew me more deeply into their lives, requiring me to balance my researcher role with the ethical imperative to provide support in moments of crisis. With no rulebook for navigating such emotional terrain, I relied on my instincts.

Lastly, I shall discuss how I managed my time in the field and the limitations of the study.

Accompanying women: Reflections on fieldwork

According to its Latin origins, the word 'accompaniment' literally means 'with bread' (Block & Griffin 2013: 14), implying the act of sharing resources and time, which points to mutuality and friendship. As a practice, accompaniment finds its roots in the principles of liberatory traditions that emphasise the responsibility of people of faith or those with privilege in secular contexts to support those most affected by injustice. The second principle, 'walking together', emphasises developing genuine relationships and providing support rather than offering help from a distance (Goizueta 2009: 199 cited in Long 2025; Mei-Singh 2021: 81; Nicholson 2021: 281-2). Personally, this aligns with my practice of seva (service to others). Seva is rooted in the Sanskrit word sev, meaning 'to serve'. This is part of my faith practices and, for me, signifies serving others with my time, resources, and knowledge by walking with them through their challenges. It is rooted in the central Islamic ethics of working alongside people to help them reach their optimum potential. [4]

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[4] https://www.iis.ac.uk/scholarly-contributions/aga-khan-development-network-akdn-an-ethical-framework/
(Accessed 15 March 2024)

Accompaniment is a methodological and conceptual tool for a humanist–activist social science praxis to highlight real-world problems (Yarris & Duncan 2024: 6). While studying child hunger in Northeast Brazil, Scheper-Hughes' interlocutors insisted that she 'accompany' them in their struggles, which she did each time she returned (1995: 410). Scheper-Hughes argues that 'we can be anthropologists, comrades, and companheiras' alongside those we study (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 420). Similarly, Yarris & Duncan's (2024) edited collection on accompaniment suggests that it is not merely a mode of knowledge production but rather an ethical commitment according to which researchers are called on to act in solidarity with those they seek to understand.

In the first week of my research, I faced the dilemma of choosing between adopting the stance of a detached researcher or working closely with my interlocutors through their daily challenges. For me, the only way forward was to adopt the position of a caring, observant anthropologist. This aligns with Saxton's (2021) and Yarris's (2021) 'accompaniment' approach (see also Farmer 2007; Mei-Singh 2021; Yarris 2021). I understand accompaniment as a way of conducting ethnographic work that aligns and engages with, and is guided by, my interlocutors' lived experiences (Yarris & Duncan 2024: 9).

Early in the fieldwork, I observed my interlocutors' uncertainties and discomfort. For example, some weeks in, one interlocutor was threatened by her in-laws after filing for divorce with my assistance. Her in-laws orchestrated her brother's incarceration on false charges and threatened to kill her. This incident shook me profoundly. While I feared for my own safety, I could not abandon my interlocutor on ethical grounds. Similarly, other women faced challenges around precarious immigration status, housing, learning English, and moving from benefits to employment — challenges I could not simply stand by and watch. Instead, through acts of trust and care, I worked alongside them with openness, humility, and self-reflexiveness.

Drawing on my linguistic and digital skills and general know-how, I consistently showed up, remained present, and was guided by what was most urgent for my interlocutors. This was not simply data collection, but an ethic of care and an ethical commitment to those who had opened up to me (Yarris & Duncan 2024: 5-9). I remained aware of the possibility of confusion between my role as observer and accompanist (Yarris 2021: 220), yet, like Yarris (2021), I chose to work alongside my interlocutors in facing their existential challenges, reflecting continuously on my position and the power dynamics it created (Yarris & Duncan 2024: 182-3).

After completing the fieldwork, I was physically and emotionally exhausted and soon faced the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought increased family responsibilities alongside study pressures. This took a significant toll on my well-being, leading to severe illness, a year's break from studies, and a 3.5-year recovery. Despite these challenges, my relationships with interlocutors remained important, and I continued to show up in their lives (Yarris & Duncan 2024: 179). However, my approach shifted, resembling Long's (2025) study of hypnotherapists in Indonesia who adapt their practice to needs and desires — what he terms 'aQompaniment'. This ethic of care involves intentional presence, meaningful support, and creating 'closeness' (Long 2025). It offers a framework for reflecting on what form of journey can accommodate both mine and my interlocutors' capacities, needs, and vulnerabilities. I now purposefully tailor my involvement, saying 'yes', 'no', or offering alternatives to maintain relational balance (Long 2025).

Acknowledging margins: Reflecting on my limitations

Although this study centres on an in-depth ethnographic analysis of ten South Asian women, which is a relatively small sample size, the research undertaken is relevant within a broader context. For instance, between April 2019 and December 2020, 4,300 Destitution Domestic Violence (DDV) concession applications were received, 3,655 of which were granted.[5] These statistics highlight the demographic scale and significance of this research. Furthermore, my continued engagement with my interlocutors after the fieldwork, as well as with newly arrived migrants from Syria and Afghanistan facing similar challenges in my faith community, underscores the broader applicability of my findings to diverse migrant populations tackling similar issues.

My positionality inevitably shaped this research in multiple ways. My seniority in age, education, life experience, and knowledge, alongside my familiarity with bureaucratic systems, sometimes positioned me as an authority figure, both facilitating and limiting openness. This was softened because we had many shared experiences. For some participants, this seniority created a sense of safety that encouraged candid disclosure, requests for advice, and openness. It helped them speak with ease because they felt that I understood their context. At the same time, it initially reinforced the very hierarchies I sought to soften, leading to guardedness in early conversations, especially around personal and intimate detail, which eased over time. I remained cautious of the possibility that some might intentionally emphasize their helplessness to elicit my support. Yet the length of time I spent with them allowed me to see the whole arc of their situation and better gauge their circumstances.

My own experiences as a married woman in a traditional household fostered empathy and points of connection, but also carried the risk of over-identification, potentially influencing how I framed narratives, the questions I asked, and interpreted accounts. I mitigated these risks through deliberate strategies, including very selective self-disclosure, participant-led conversations, and triangulating accounts with documentary evidence and repeated testimonies.

It is important to acknowledge that my participants' subjective experiences, omissions, and personal biases have shaped this study and my interpretation of the data. However, I believe the close rapport I built with them helped to counterbalance these limitations. This connection allowed for nuanced insights into their lived experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities of migration, kinship, and personal dynamics within transnational marriages and familyhood, as well as mental health challenges and economic, social, and emotional precarity in migrant settlement. These dynamics informed not only the depth and character of the data collected, but also the ethical imperative to represent participants' voices in ways that honoured them and resisted reproducing unequal power relations. It is also important to acknowledge that I mainly collected data from women who had experienced abuse. I was unable to directly engage with the men – husbands, fathers, brothers – and in-laws whose perspectives and experiences remain largely unexplored. Their motivations, constraints, and vulnerabilities are crucial to understanding the full complexity of these dynamics.

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[5] See WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023 (Accessed on 23 Jan 2024)

In the following sections of this introductory chapter, I shall build on these considerations. I begin by outlining the UK-South Asian migration history and policies, and the UK's broader context and terms with which women must contend. After that, I shall critically engage with the relevant bodies of anthropological research, as well as present the central theoretical framework guiding this study.

Ethnographic Context: History of UK-South Asian Migration, Marriage Migration, Immigration Policies and Demographic Context

In what follow, I trace the history, polices, and phases of UK-South Asian migration, before turning to marriage migration, immigration regimes, demographic information on British South Asian populations and the context of this research, and finally the impact of the UK's 2012 immigration policies on my interlocutors. I shall also explore the processes involved in their marriage migrations, how some women sought leave to remain in the United Kingdom, and how they navigated life as single women dependent on benefits. Next, drawing on the literature on South Asian migration to the United Kingdom, I shall outline existing scholarly insights into women's experiences of transnational marriage migration. As this review shows, researchers thus far have predominantly analysed women's experiences through their roles in marriage, kinship, and community networks. It also demonstrates the lack of studies on migrants who settle as single women in the United Kingdom with no natal family nearby to support them. This thesis will seek to address this lacuna.

After this, I examine the discourse on Muslim women's practices relating to the ethical self, framed within the context of, and in response to, national and global events. In contrast, my research is situated within a contemporary political landscape characterized by heightened immigration restrictions, stringent social and welfare policies, anti-immigrant sentiments, and complex familial and social dynamics, where the ethics of 'keeping going' compels my interlocutors forwards.

Following this, I shall situate my work within the anthropology of ethics, where the primary focus thus far has been on ordinary ethics, the interrogation of ordinary life, everyday actions, the ability to live an ethical life (Laidlaw 2017; Lambek 2010), and parents' moral actions when faced with their children's suffering and their transformation in the context of the 'care of the intimate others' (Mattingly 2014). In contrast, my work suggests the need to apply a conceptual lens to studying personal ethical experiences within a particular historical moment shaped by the intertwining social, political, or familial stringency and the relational challenges these present.

To this end, I shall outline the relevance of my concept of 'ethical (re)positioning' for the study of ethical self-becoming as an ongoing, often unconscious, evolving process of one's ethical self over time through experiences, interactions, and reflections, rather than through deliberate self-cultivation or fashioning choices.

Ethnographic Context: Histories and Immigration Policies of South Asian Migration to the United Kingdom

Early South Asian migration was shaped by British colonial interests, such as the establishment of the East India Company, a powerful trading entity, which imposed restrictions such as the 1657 travel license, and regulated who could travel between India and Britain (Fisher 2007b: 306-8). After the 1857 Indian Rebellion, colonial ideologies and racial theories, like social Darwinism, framed Indians as inherently different, reinforcing hostile stereotypes (Fisher 2007b: 305). Despite this, Indians had been arriving in Britain since the 1600s, with about a thousand arriving annually by the 18th century (Fisher 2007a: 153-9). These migrants included sailors, female ayahs, students, and professionals from both the working and upper classes (Visram 2002: 44), with very few marriages between South Asians and English recorded at that time (Visram 2002: 35-6). Female Ayahs, in particular, became vital for English wives travelling to and from India after 1885 (Visram 2002: 50). From 1855 to 1894, laws such as the 1894 Merchant Shipping Act restricted lascar (Indians employed by the British) settlement and enabled forced repatriation (Visram 2002: 56). In contrast, students and professionals generally moved freely and independently (Visram 2002: 72-104).

The British Nationality Act of 1948 was a major post-empire reform, granting Commonwealth citizens, including Indians and Pakistanis, the right to settle in the UK. Migration surged during post-war labour shortages, especially in the 1960s-70s, often involving single men sending remittances home. The expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972 also triggered a large influx of East African Asians (Twaddle 1990: 149–63, cited in Peach 2006). However, the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 marked the start of formal immigration restrictions. Anticipating barriers, many South Asian sojourners decided to settle permanently and bring their families over, initiating a wave of reunification and community formation (Peach 2006: 134-7).

The 1965 voucher scheme further restricted migration for job-seeking South Asian men. At that point, only two legal entry routes remained: dependent boys with fathers already in the UK or marriage to women settled in Britain (Ballard 1990: 232). Efforts to curb immigration continued with the Immigration Act 1971, which introduced the concept of 'partiality,' giving settlement rights to those born in the UK or with ancestral ties. This coincided with Britain joining the European Economic Community (Consterdine 2017: 7). Thereafter, the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987 imposed financial penalties on transport companies bringing in passengers without valid clearance, increasing the securitisation of UK borders and weakening asylum protections (Nicholson 1997; Ruff 1989).

The 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2007 immigration and asylum acts introduced successive restrictions. They established induction and accommodation centres, allowed refusal of support to childless asylum seekers, tightened claims, appeals, removals, and sham marriage procedures, expanded tagging powers, differentiated procedures by nationality, made refugee status temporary and subject to five-year review, introduced biometric residence permits, and mandated automatic deportation for offenders. These measures disproportionately impacted South Asian and other migrant communities in Britain (Fomina 2010: 60-2).

The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 further reduced rights, aiming to cut net migration by tightening removals and appeals, restricting access to public services, and criminalising illegal work. They also limited access to housing, banking, and driving licences (Lewis, Waite & Hodkinson 2017). The 'hostile environment' strategy of the 2010s marked a turn toward punitive governance, using immigration enforcement for social control and deterrence rather than regulation (Taylor 2018). Post-Brexit reforms ended EU free movement, replacing it with a points-based system and 'Skilled Work Visa', making entry harder for Europeans but easing it for others (Portes & Springford 2023: 137).

As we can see, South Asian presence in Britain began around the seventeenth century with visitors and later seamen on British ships. Post-World War II labour demand led to mass migration in the 1950s–70s, with workers later bringing their families, who settled and moved from manual labour into business and professional roles (Ballard 1994; Bachkaniwala, Wright & Ram 2001; Basu 2001; Farooq 2014; Gardner 2002). Subsequent flows, as Khadria (2006) notes, included highly skilled 'knowledge workers' as well as semi and unskilled 'service workers'. As I explain next, transnational marriage is also a major driver of transnational mobility.

Ethnographic Context: UK-South Asian Marriage Migration and Immigration Regimes

Along with economic concerns, transnational marriage migration from South Asia to the United Kingdom has been a major driver for migration since World War II (Ballard 1994; Ballard 1990: 221), particularly after tightening of immigration rules. The abolition of the Primary Purpose Rule in 1997, which had previously required proof that marriages were not solely for migration, led to increased spouse settlements (Charsley, Storer-Church, Benson & Van Hear 2012: 864). However, new restrictions followed: the probationary period for spouses before they received UK residency was extended from one to two years, the 'Knowledge of Life in the UK' test was introduced, and from 2005 the Certificate of Approval (CoA) was required to marry (Charsley *et al.* 2012: 865–6). As explained below, post-2012 reforms further increased the probationary period for migrant spouses from two to five years and introduced a minimum income requirement of £18,600 (raised to £39,000 recently – see footnote 22), along with stricter checks on the genuineness of relationships (Turner 2015: 634–5). Still, marriage remains central to transnational mobility (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Constable 2005; Gardner & Grillo 2002) and continues to be a vital route for South Asian migration and the formation of transnational family networks (Shaw & Charsley 2006).

Transnational marriage arrangements are not merely a legal status or demographic trend; they are lived, negotiated practice shaped by gender, class, and kinship. They are also subject to migration regimes (Balani 2023), contribute to othering migrants from the mainstream population (Pande 2014: 75), and can be understood in some contexts as forced (Quek 2018; Mody 2015), or as arranged, or mediated through love (Shaw 2000; Wiegand 2010: 56; Grover 2009; 2015). Marriage has long been the significant pathway for women's migration, but immigration laws often frame them within 'family roles' rather than economic ones (Boyd & Grieco 2003). Migrant spouses on

a spousal visa may lose their legal status if the relationship ends during the probationary period, creating a power imbalance in their transnational marriages (Charsley 2005b).

Traditionally, women were viewed as dependents following husbands or fathers, but this narrative is evolving (Boyd & Grieco 2003). Mooney (2006) shows that Sikh women in Canada often become 'agents of marital citizenship,' with one marriage enabling broader family migration, facilitating collective mobility. Regional differences and social contexts also shape how marriage migration is practised. Some faced hardships of deception or dowry fraud (Mooney 2006), and experiences of women 'left behind' back home include forming networks, taking over day-to-day decisions, responsibility, and 'housework' to cope with the absence of male relatives and maintain transnational family ties (Gardner 2006; Gulati 1993).

Expectations in marriage can differ sharply. Some men seek 'traditional' South Asian brides, while some educated women look for 'modern' partners abroad (Constable 2005; Balzani 2006; Mand 2002). Inverting gender norms, some men migrate through marriage and find themselves in feminised labour roles or matrilocal households, facing transformations in domestic dynamics and gendered relations of power (Bi 2019; Charsley 2005a; Gallo 2006). Thus, transnational marriages are shaped by a complex mix of affection, obligation, legality, and strategy, and depend on individual circumstances and context. They form a key mechanism through which mobility, belonging, and kinship are reconfigured across borders and generations.

Ethnographic Context: The UK Backdrop

As a result of transnational movements, the South Asian population in the UK has grown significantly over the decades. Ballard (1994: 7), drawing on census data compiled by E.J.B. Rose and later reports by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, notes an increase from 106,300 (0.23%) in 1961 to 1.43 million (3.04%) by 1991. This trend continued, with the 2011 Census recording approximately 1.45 million Indians (2.3%), 1.17 million Pakistanis (1.9%), and 452,000 Bangladeshis (0.7%), contributing to a rise in the 'Asian British' category from 4.4% in 2001 to 6.9% in 2011 (ONS 2013).[6] By 2021, this figure had grown to 5.5 million (9.3%), reflecting the sustained and expanding presence of South Asian communities in the UK (ONS 2022).[7]

In the context of this research, the political backdrop is the post-Brexit period of extreme flux and uncertainty, during which the public imagination was affected by a series of assumptions, such as support for anti-immigrant policies, an anti-human rights rhetoric, and stronger defence policies (Koch 2018: 4). Since 2010, Britain had witnessed an increase in punitive policies, austerity politics, and public-sector cuts (Koch 2018: 3-5). In her study of austerity in Britain, Koch (2018) critiques the common assumption that democracy operates in an inherently fair, even-handed, and non-coercive manner. Instead, she argues that state policies involve coercion, supports liberal capitalism, and uphold unequal power structures, even within democratic frameworks. She argues

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[6] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/2011census/2013-05-16#:~:text=5.,of%2039%20years%20of%20age. (Accessed 1 August 2025)
[7] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed 1 August 2025)

that the political ramifications of these processes are manifold, affecting the lives of marginalized people the hardest as they attempt to engage with the state's coercive powers on their terms.

In my study, in some cases, marriages were forced on my interlocutors, leaving them with little means of opposing the patriarchal (Hunnicutt 2009; Kandiyoti 1988; 1998) outlooks of their families. In other cases, the women's families arranged their marriages through brokers or family friends. Women such as Fatima were forced to put in the 'marriage work' of compromise, adjustments, and tolerance to make their marriages work (see Charsley 2005a: 389-90; Gardner 2006; Mand 2005; Mooney 2006; Shaw 2000: 94). Like Fatima, they all faced restrictive and controlling attitudes, such as not being allowed out alone, having limited access to a phone, being forced to undertake extensive housework, not being allowed access to their own money, suffering physical abuse, and being forced to remain in their marriages, both by their natal families and by their in-laws. As a result of these attitudes, the control and harm inflicted by the natal family and the women's in-laws became unbearable and, in some cases, life-threatening – UK law understands this as domestic abuse.[8] My interlocutors had no choice but to flee their marital homes. This led to the breakdown of their transnational marriages, and they then faced the risk of deportation back to their home countries owing to the latest immigration rules, as I shall now explain.

Dictating the terms: The impact of the United Kingdom's immigration rules on the women in my study

The UK Government's decreased openness to migration led to the tightening of restrictions enforced in 2012, as faced by my interlocutors. One of the rules is that those arriving on a spousal visa must live as a married couple continually in the United Kingdom for 5 years (increased from 2 years). The migrant spouse can apply for ILR in the United Kingdom after completing a 5-year probatory period and a spousal visa renewal application after the first 33 months since their arrival. However, if the transnational marriage breaks down within the initial 5-year probatory period, their spousal visa is terminated, and the migrant spouse must return to their home country. Such stringent rules meant that as soon as these women fled their marriages when marital life became life-threatening or unbearable or when they were handed to the police by their in-laws on false charges, they faced the risk of deportation.

The UK Government asserts that this tightening of immigration rules prevents sham marriages and respects private and family life (Wray 2006). In contrast, Charsley and Benson (2012) argue that these are punitive aspects of the immigration system (see also Mirza 2016, who claims that immigration rules can serve perpetrators of abuse). As South Asian women in marriages that have broken down, the women studied here faced immense stigma and shame and very few life prospects in their ancestral homes (see Mand 2005: 420; Shaw 2000: 81). They dreaded the harsh judgements they would receive and feared social ostracism. They worried about the prospect of remarrying as a divorcee owing to social prejudice or being forced to reconcile and return to their abusive marriage. They also worried about how they would manage economically and, as single women, were anxious about the community support and acceptance challenges they would encounter. In three cases, parents would not tolerate their daughters' marriage breakdowns. They

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[8] See https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/domestic-abuse. (Accessed on 16 Sep 2024)

ostracized their daughters, rendering a return home even more frightening. In one case, stepfamily members threatened to kill my interlocutor if she returned and claimed a share in her father's wealth. She was the only interlocutor in such a situation. The others did not face claims to family wealth.[9] Consequently, all the women in my study struggled with the punitive immigration rules and fought for legal residency in the United Kingdom.

Contending with immigration policies: Migrant spouses, domestic abuse, and the struggle for legal recognition in the United Kingdom

In 2012, after lobbying by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the UK Government introduced the DDV concession.[10] This rule specifies that if migrant women such as Fatima fulfil the criteria of domestic abuse set out by the UK Home Office, they can apply for temporary leave to remain in the United Kingdom outside the immigration rules under the DDV concession[11] by filling out an online form.[12] If their application were successful, they would be granted leave to remain for 3 months, permitted to enter into employment, and given immediate access to benefits. For this, applicants had to apply separately to the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) for benefits or housing benefits. If the migrant's application was rejected, they were deemed illegal, had no recourse to public funds, and were forced to return to their home country. Although such concessions were available, my interlocutors were unaware of them. They had not gathered any hard evidence of their ill-treatment in their marital homes, nor did they have the local know-how or linguistic and digital skills needed to undertake such applications. In the face of bureaucratic processes such as these, they urgently required adequate legal guidance and support. They were forced to find and rely on the limited UK legal aid provision and its mediocre services to fight for a DDV concession and then an ILR or to seek asylum in the United Kingdom, which was a challenging task for such women.

Fighting for the legal right to remain in the United Kingdom was a lengthy, challenging process that sometimes took several years. During this time, some of my interlocutors lived in safehouses with a weekly stipend of approximately £65. In other cases, the UK Home Office placed them in a room in a house shared with people of different nationalities, previously unknown to them. They were not allowed to enter paid work but received a weekly stipend of less than £40 on which to survive. Life was dull and rife with legal, social, and economic stress for women such as Fatima. Such daily strife and the worries relating to their legal cases also led to poor emotional health.

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[9] See Haque Solihin Ahmad & Jani 2020 who argue that women are deprived in terms of inheriting property after the demise of their parents. This is largely a result of the negligence of practising Islamic teachings regarding inheritance at the individual and family level. The principle of the inheritance of property has nonetheless been clearly stated in the holy Qur'an and Islam has established a dignified position for women in the family and society in all sectors.
[10] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67bf27ba72e83aab48866b0d/Migrant+Victims+of+Domestic+Abuse+Concession.pdf
[11] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/application-for-benefits-for-visa-holder-domestic-violence
[12] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67a218b3ad556423b636ca0c/MVDAC-+reader+extended+-+02-25.pdf (Accessed 1 April 2025).

Building a new life: Settlement processes after gaining rights to remain in the United Kingdom

After lengthy legal battles, when my interlocutors finally received their right to remain in the United Kingdom, many faced destitution. As they could now legally reside and work in the United Kingdom, they needed to fend for themselves. Their weekly stipend was therefore terminated within a month, and they faced eviction from their UK Home Office-provided accommodation. Some moved into council accommodation provided by their local homelessness unit. To avoid homelessness, one interlocutor had no choice but to move into mixed-gender accommodation, which upset her because she had never lived with strangers of mixed genders. Most women stayed away from their community due to shame and stigma. Moreover, none of the women had any natal family in the United Kingdom to support them, leaving them with scarce support networks.

Over recent decades, the UK Government has also made a concerted effort to shift all its services to e-service platforms.[13] In some cases, online activities and e-services such as benefits claims, searching for property rentals, paying utility bills and council taxes, banking activities, and job applications became extremely difficult due to a lack of language and digital skills and limited knowledge of UK life. These digital services subjected my interlocutors to immense levels of stress. This placed some of them in easily exploitable positions at the hands of people who came to their assistance, either professionals such as lawyers or NGO employees or trusted persons in their private lives. In some instances, these people manipulated their trust.

Once receiving benefits, my interlocutors were obliged to enter a commitment at their job centre to learn English, find voluntary work, prepare a CV, and make online applications for paid jobs. With the current austerity measures, some had to wait several months for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes to be available. Others found it hard to engage with and benefit from the classes owing to their poor mental health. The job centre demands were challenging for those with poor language skills and no work experience or education. As they commenced life alone in the United Kingdom, they struggled to keep up with their mandated job centre commitments. They constantly feared that their inability to learn English or find work would freeze their benefits, leaving them without a place to live or the funds to survive.

My interlocutors were young women who initially aspired to secure a 'good' marriage. Instead, they encountered arduous rites of passage and relentless, challenging life events. With limited alternatives, they were compelled to confront these challenges, keep going, and navigate the numerous ethical dilemmas they faced. Based on the research synopsis above, the following section outlines the key bodies of scholarly work to which this study seeks to contribute.

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[13]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/296336/Government_Digital_Stratetegy_-_November_2012.pdf (Accessed 12 May 2024).

Review of Relevant Scholarly Research

Experiences of migrant South Asian women in transnational marriages in the United Kingdom

This section primarily draws on academic research concerning South Asian migration to the United Kingdom. It reviews the findings of current studies regarding women's experiences of transnational marriage migration. A close analysis of this academic discourse reveals that women's migratory experiences are primarily examined based on their roles within marriage, kinship, and community networks. Areas concerning women in broken transnational marriages who face domestic abuse, legal challenges, and destitution on their own remain sparsely explored. In addition, there is a scarcity of studies on migrants who settle in the United Kingdom as single women without the support of their natal family in proximity, a gap this thesis seeks to address.

The vast literature on South Asians in the United Kingdom explains how, after World War II, there was a large amount of male labour migration to Britain owing to plentiful job opportunities (Anwar 1979; Ballard 1994: 6-7; Saifullah Khan 1977). The first settler became the bridgehead, helping others to migrate through kinship or friendship ties (Ballard 1994: 11; Eade 1989; Shaw 1994; 2000: 40). In a seminal volume on South Asian settlement in the United Kingdom (Ballard 1994), contributors describe how wives and children joined earlier settlers. One consequence of these family reunifications was the reinstatement of a more conservative lifestyle for the men (Pakistani community: Shaw 1994: 37-68, 2000; Sikh community: Ballard 1994: 96; Bangladeshi community: Gardner & Shukur 1994: 154-60). This led to the growth of South Asian families in the United Kingdom and increased transnational marriages between the United Kingdom and the homelands, which continues to this day.

Scholars predominantly position the literature on transnational marriage arrangements between the United Kingdom and the homelands within the dynamics of kinship and community. In these studies, such marriage arrangements are presented along a continuum where, in some cases, the bride and groom have little influence over the marital decisions (Banu 2012: 142-80; Charsley & Liversage 2013: 67-8; Mody 2015; 2020; Qureshi, Charsley & Shaw 2014; Shaw 2000). The literature also points to specific instances of forced marriage (Philip & Dustin 2004). Marriage mechanisms within the Pakistani community and South Asian communities generally also indicate that marriages can take the form of 'arranged love marriages', with a parental understanding of the marriage partner choices (Shaw 2000 in the United Kingdom; Wiegand 2010: 56 in Pakistan; Grover 2009; 2015 in India). Young adults sometimes agree to marry spouses from back home to ensure social and religious continuity (Shaw 2006: 216). In other cases, individuals strive to ensure compatibility concerning Islamic values (Rozario 2012), taking personal responsibility for their marriage arrangements. Marrying within UK-based Islamic communities can also be a way to resist parental authority (Abeyasekera 2016; Rozario 2011).

An examination of the literature concerning transnational marriages and South Asian migrants' lives underscores that women were situated and functioned within their kinship networks and the wider community. Such literature points to the role women played in building enduring kin and

community relationships through formal and informal social activities such as gift-giving (*lena dena*) or by playing an active role in their children's religious education (see Shaw 1994: 46-9, 2000: 227-58 for a Pakistani example), or perpetuating and generating their traditions, especially in the context of kin care and marriage (see Bhachu 1991 for a Sikh example). In the Bangladeshi context, Gardner (2006: 377-8) has described the expectations placed on Bangladeshi wives who stayed home between the 1950s and 1980s to carry out essential 'wife work' of caring for children and elderly in-laws while also facing conflicts in their in-laws' homes, the long-term absence of their husbands, and separation from their natal family (Gardner 1995; 2006; 2002; 2015). In time, this changed, and spouses now join their partners in the United Kingdom when they are granted immigration clearance to travel (Gardner 2006: 385).

With the growth of South Asian communities in the United Kingdom, a related focus highlights the risks and benefits women face when marrying transnationally and migrating to the United Kingdom. One of the most significant risks is finding that in the United Kingdom they must live alone (or with in-laws) with their children, while their husbands live with their English partner (Charsley 2005a: 386-9; 2013). In one case, the woman remained married because her in-laws were opposed to divorce, and she hoped that her husband would leave his English partner and return to her. In other cases, women lived with husbands who used polygamy to negotiate what they wanted in a partner, a custom employed to the detriment of the wife, who was chosen by his parents (Charsley & Liversage 2013: 67-8). Studies also show that migrant brides can find their husband to be very different from the man they had met at home at the time of the marriage. In the United Kingdom, women sometimes found their husbands' lifestyles involved the consumption of alcohol and drugs. In some cases, women did not tell anyone of the abuse they suffered for fear of being sent back home, which would damage the family's honour (Samad & Eade, 2002: 84-5 describe similar cases). In another instance, it was not until after the marriage that the bride's family found out that the husband was disabled and unable to work (Charsley 2013).

After first-generation migrants settled, transnational marriages between the UK and home countries persisted, drawing academic attention. A 2006 collection of articles (Charsley & Shaw 2006) examined gender, agency, and changing roles through migration. One study highlights the expectations placed on Jat Sikh migrant wives in Ontario, Canada, to financially support family members to migrate by engaging in wage labour. Although this positively reconfigured the social roles of some Jat Sikh women, gender hierarchies remained. Women continued to experience the anxieties associated with their traditional position as daughters-in-law responsible for domestic duties and the family's honour. These situations became increasingly burdensome in transnational contexts, requiring women to be college-educated, 'simple', 'domestically inclined', 'homely', and with an 'adjusting nature' (Mooney 2006).

In contrast, in the same collection, in a study of Ahmadi Muslims in the United Kingdom, Balzani (2006) describes a very different kind of community, where women appear to have enjoyed more of a voice and greater standing, being permitted to attend the mosque and take on leadership roles. They had a national women's and men's president. Following the educational success of British Ahmadi women within the Western context, Ahmadi men chose to marry women from Pakistan because they were less Western, less well-educated, and had lower aspirations. In response, local

mosques set up marriage offices to facilitate local marriages between UK-based men and women and to deter men from seeking non-British wives. This expanding literature sheds light on women's experiences within the context of kin and community.

Other studies have examined the experiences of women in the United Kingdom who marry men from their ancestral homeland. Charsley (2013) describes how UK brides' families manage the risk by delaying the couple's cohabitation until the husband successfully migrates to the United Kingdom. Mohammad (2015) explains that, to fulfil their desire to live near their natal families, British women marry men from abroad, who then migrate and set up home near the UK-based bride's family. She argues that such shifts in marital scripts reflect a new repertoire of self-making and female assertion, creating a more cosmopolitan contemporary Muslim identity. In cases involving women who marry and move to their ancestral homelands, Werbner (2013) describes how migrant brides may not share the same lifeworld and everyday assumptions concerning kinship performance, which can differ radically between those who live in their ancestral homeland and families who live abroad. This body of research has overarchingly focused on the mechanics of transnational marriage arrangements, shedding extensive light on the role and experiences of female spouses situated relationally within their kin and community.

This extensive focus on transnational marriage arrangements and migration also highlights the breakdown of transnational marriages (Qureshi 2016). Drawing on fieldwork from 2005 to 2009, Qureshi, Charsley & Shaw (2014) argue that the increase in transnational marriage breakdowns points to instances of domestic violence (their term), a lack of compatibility, infidelity, and economic disparities. The authors also point to the shift in the next generation, who had become unwilling to tolerate, adjust, or compromise, leading to a rise in divorce among South Asians in the United Kingdom.

Charsley (2013) describes how marital breakdown can also occur because of educational differences, spousal expectations, damaging behaviour such as threats, physical violence, unfair accusations, economic issues, or when men choose to marry UK-born women to gain UK citizenship. In these situations, women are mentally exhausted and subjected to gossip and a loss of family honour. However, in Charsley's (2013) study, their UK-based natal families support them. In one case, even though the broader community exerts pressure on the father to control his daughter and maintain the family honour, the violence she was experiencing compelled him to overlook these social pressures and support her in separating from her husband (Charsley 2013: 149). Charsley (2013) also presents cases where husbands from Pakistan and UK-born wives enjoy happy marriages. In one case, both partners work to make ends meet. In another case involving a middle-class happily married couple, the wife works part-time in the United Kingdom to support her family.

In an extensive analysis of marital breakdown in UK South Asian families, Qureshi (2016) focuses on the marriage relationship, legal pluralism faced by divorced couples, and new kinship practices formed post-divorce. She illustrates how women in arranged marriages expect to receive support from their natal families when their marriages to men from their ancestral homelands do not work out. In contrast, women in love marriages struggle to receive kin support. Studies illustrating kin and community involvement in the Indian context show similar patterns (Grover 2009; 2011;

Palriwala 1991). Sometimes, couples are pushed into mediation to keep them together (Basu 2015; Gardner 2022). In other cases, couples are estranged but continue living under one roof. Some separate, whereas others find themselves yo-yo-ing between separating and trying to live together because of family and community pressure against divorce Qureshi (2016). In divorce cases, (Qureshi 2016) describes the complications of legal pluralism inherent in marriage, illustrating the differences between civil and sharia divorce in terms of their mechanisms.

In a minority of cases, divorced women choose not to remarry. Despite experiencing financial and emotional vulnerability, they spoke about becoming empowered or learning to stand 'on their own feet' (Qureshi 2016: 219-20). These women built relationships around their children, natal families, and friendships. Qureshi (2016) describes women taking a cautious approach to second marriages; divorcees move away from arranged marriages to marriages of their choice but try to keep their families supportive of their chosen partner. Moreover, there is evidence of mistrust in spouses chosen from their ancestral homelands and the formation of stepfamilies. People tend to consider kinships in terms of bloodline, longer-term futures, as well as marital alliances with their children. Qureshi (2022) illustrates that some divorcees suffer from a 'spoilt identity' and devaluation after getting divorced. Others are valued and sought-after because they have legal rights to remain in the United Kingdom and could therefore support a spousal migration to the United Kingdom.

In some cases, second marriages are again entered into with people from back home to avoid local and internal discrimination, such as low socioeconomic standing, the stigma of divorce, etc. More broadly, research on transnational marriages and breakdowns presents similar foci.[14] Together, this literature has described the experiences of women in transnational marriages, with marital breakdown primarily being seen to take place alongside continuing relationships with the women's natal kin, whose influence, support, and physical proximity is underscored. Such studies describe experiences of divorce processes in relation to family, community mediation or the legal pluralism inherent in Muslim marriages. They stress the support provided by kin, friends, and the community, especially when it comes to the children of divorcees, as well as describing the second marriages they enter. The strong normative focus on the experiences of migrant spouses, which are analysed primarily in relation to their position within marriage, kinship, and community networks, has shown how South Asian kinship systems operate collectively.

Insufficient attention has been paid to those outside of this normative realm, however. Contrary to the approach adopted in the work discussed above, by studying single women who sought help from local NGOs and immigration solicitors on their own, I have taken a different entry point. I have unveiled cases that would otherwise have been hard to identify or would have remained masked owing to cultural pressures, stigma, and family honour. I have chosen to examine the experiences of women who travelled to the United Kingdom alone, with no natal family in their

[14] See comparative scholarship on transnational marriages, such as studies that show marriages undertaken for residency or economic mobility motives (Sportel 2020 studying Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Egyptian cases); that show the challenges of family and immigration laws (Sportel, de Hart & Kulk 2020 for Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Egyptian cases); that highlight the emotional work entailed by divorce and returning home with children (Quah 2018); that illustrate separated parents working together for the children's sake (Quah 2020); and that explain shifts in gendered powers, economic autonomy, support networks, and programmes to rethink and relearn Islamic norms creating a corrective to Islamic life (al-Sharamani 2017 for Somali migrants in Helsinki).

host country, and whose marriages broke down. Such cases have received little attention thus far. As mentioned, statistics available thanks to the Freedom of Information Act[15] show that the UK Home Office granted around 4,300 DDV concessions from the second quarter of 2019 to the fourth quarter of 2020. An application for a DDV concession can only be made by those who are in the United Kingdom as the spouse or partner of a British citizen and have experienced a breakdown in their transnational marriage owing to domestic abuse.[16] This constitutes a reasonably large number of migrant spouses.

In light of my data, this raises further questions, such as what happens to those who are alone with little education, poor English language and digital skills, and meagre support networks, who flee from abusive marriages and face deportation, homelessness, and economic, social, and emotional destitution. Considering the stringency of the 2012 immigration rules, there has been little research on separated or divorced migrant brides who have experienced domestic abuse and opt to remain in the United Kingdom, for whom going back home is not an option and who thus face living

alone.[17] For these spouses, a settlement also entails being economically independent or confident of economic support within the marital home. In some cases, as was the case for my interlocutors, English language skills and knowledge of UK life and its institutional ways of working, such as medical support, language, and training provisions, were essential to support their settlement in the country. However, such services have been reduced following the austerity measures adopted by the government. Newly arrived immigrants feel the impact of these stringencies acutely, which exert a clear influence on their settlement pathways.

Alongside the regulations imposed via strict immigration rules, migrant spouses also face many other challenges. For instance, spouses arrive with their own ways of life, which can differ from the practices of their marital families. In these stages, migrant spouses require high levels of support to help them adjust to their new lives. At first, they looked to their marital families for this support. However, when such support was lacking, it proved difficult for my interlocutors to settle successfully in their host country. Furthermore, poor levels of education and the non-recognition of qualifications in host countries make it even more challenging for immigrants to achieve economic stability. As a result of current racist discourses, anti-migrant rhetoric, and the discrimination experienced by ethnic and minority communities, the United Kingdom can be a daunting, unfriendly place to live.

This thesis aims to fill the gap when it comes to research on the experiences of migrant women in transnational marriages that have broken down who settle as single women in this geopolitical, familial, legal, social, and economic context. My analysis also explores notions of ethical self-becoming as women navigate 'carceral escapes' and face 'multiple ethical dilemmas'. I shall therefore seek to address the following key question: how do these women navigate the ethical

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[15] https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/ddv_concession_grants?unfold=1#incoming-1768049.
[16] https://freemovement.org.uk/domestic-violence-immigration-route/. (Accessed 23 January 2024)
[17] For comparative studies on widowed or separated women in Delhi, see Grover (2011); on Moroccan women in Spain, see Zoniti (2004); and on women in Tanzania, see Mand (2005). In these cases, women remain closely connected to friends and family for support in facing challenges as single, separated, divorced, or widowed women.

dilemmas and challenges they face? Before addressing this, however, I first wish to review some studies on the ethical practices of Muslim women.

Muslim women's ethical self-fashioning practices in response to global events

This thesis not only seeks to expand our understanding of South Asian transnational marital breakdowns and the experiences of divorced and separated wives but also aims to contribute to the study of Muslim women's practices of ethical selfhood. Much of the existing literature examines Muslim women's ethical practices within the context of national and global events. In the following section, I shall focus on how these events affect the lived experiences of Muslims more broadly, before highlighting scholarly discourse that explores Muslim women's deliberate efforts to engage in acts of ethical self-cultivation in response to these events.

Local and global reactions towards Islam

In Britain, the politicization of Muslims began with the 1984 Honeyford affair in Bradford and then intensified after the 1988 Rushdie Affair (see Lewis 1994: 9; Ballard 2008; Macey 2009: 38). These events contributed to the growing perception of Muslims as being incompatible with 'British values'. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' (1996) thesis, the events of 9/11, and the subsequent bombings in Madrid and London further exacerbated this sentiment. Islam increasingly came to be viewed as a domestic issue in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States, associated with terror and geopolitics, and no longer geographically constrained to the Middle East and South Asia (Malik 2010). This led to the 'othering' of Muslims (Kabir 2010: 199).

This context fuelled a uniform 'culturist' narrative in media and political discourse, wherein Muslim women were portrayed as a homogenized group and as passive, oppressed, and subject to patriarchal norms (Ansari 2018: 265; Ewing 2006; Grillo 2003; 2005; Snel 2003; Wikan 2002). In the wake of the UK's Prevent strategy and initiatives such as Empower Muslim Women (EMW), such representations were shaped by racialized and gendered narratives, particularly within the broader context of the War on Terror, which some argue was effectively a war on Islam (Rashid 2016: ix-xiii).

Against this historical backdrop, research on Muslim women flourished. I would like to pay particular attention to two key studies here. First, I shall review work on Muslim women's ethical practices in the UK and Europe's public spaces, after which I shall examine work on Muslim women's ethical self-cultivation within Islamic revival movements.

Muslim women's ethical self-fashioning practices in public spaces in the United Kingdom and Europe

This first section focuses on studies that examine the essentializing political discourse around culture, the 'culturalization of citizenship', and the everyday micropolitics of Muslim women's experiences of ethical self-understanding and self-fashioning (Moors & Salih 2009: 375) in public spaces within UK and European cities. In this body of work, the 'public' is viewed as a site where affective discourse and non-verbal communication occur. This is where the liberal, secular, and

religious publics are produced and operationalized and where efforts are made to transform a process of integration into a process of assimilation to a dominant normativity (Moors & Salih 2009).

For example, responding to how multiculturalism in Britain overlooked differences within communities and saw minority culture as homogeneous, Dwyer (1999a) studied young Muslim women in two London schools, contesting, negotiating, and reimaging their British Muslim identity by opposing Asian-ness to Britishness. In her study, Dwyer (1999a: 64-5) shows how her interlocutors draw on the teachings of Islam to manage parental restrictions and how young Muslim women in suburban Hertfordshire (Dwyer 1999b) use dress to construct their identities, not in binary terms but rather by reworking the meanings attached to dress styles to produce their own alternative identities. For these women, dress choices, such as the decision to wear a '*hijab*' (veil), become a way to express their religiosity or political stance or to assert themselves as self-confident British Muslims (Dwyer 2008: 146). British Bangladeshi Muslim women in London's East End contest secular notions of a 'private' religious (or personal) space and a 'public' civic (or political) space, as well as women's roles within these boundaries, through their dress, where they chose to pray, and the kinship duties they decide to follow, decoding nationalist and religious discourse to pave their own paths (Begum 2008).

Dwyer (2000) highlights that Muslim women's dress serves as a marker of family honour and of the boundaries of a collective religious or ethnic community. Dress is a crucial part of the paradigm constructed on the binary oppositions of 'home' and 'school', leading to other oppositions such as 'traditional' and 'Western', 'religious' and 'secular', or 'parents' and 'peers.' In some cases, women maintain a self-consciously Islamic identity to negotiate permission from their parents to attend university. However, by donning such a dress, they remain complicit to the dominant rhetoric of the veil and are othered by their peers (Dwyer 2000: 484). This gains them freedom in one sense while simultaneously limiting their opportunities to engage in university experiences. Women who cover do so either out of personal choice or from pressure to comply (Macey 2009: 43). They are forced to negotiate the dominant discourse of racialized gendering, which produces stereotypes and reinforces gender roles – in culturalist and essentialist paradigms of passivity and victimhood – while seeking both to retain their links with their parental cultural inheritance and their identities as British Muslim women (Dwyer 2000).

Mohammad's (2013; 2015) study of Muslim women in Birmingham describes the restrictions certain families impose on women's spatial movements, education, and employment pathways to protect the family's honour. On the other hand, Dale, Shaheen, Kalra & Fieldhouse's (2002) study of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women demonstrates that there has been a significant increase in students enrolling in full-time undergraduate courses, demonstrating a commitment to balancing paid employment with family life. However, such women face the complex challenge of potentially risking their family's honour by pursuing career and family goals. As Bhopal (2000) argues, for some British-born South Asian women, education becomes a process of redefining themselves, and they must choose whether or not to abide by their family's restrictions. These UK-based studies show how political, religious, and familial attitudes and the discourses of a particular historical context play an important role in determining how Muslim women across generations negotiate their everyday lived experiences, which becomes a process of self-redefinition. I shall now turn to studies conducted within the European context.

In Europe, Muslim women adapt their daily faith practices in various ways. In her introduction to a special issue on Islam in Europe, Salih (2009: 410) points out that, rather than abiding by a normative concept, Muslim women display a liberal disposition by contesting religious and worldly authorities to form a subjective sense of self in public spaces. Jouili (2009) notes that, in secular societies such as France and Germany, women often avoid asking to pray at the designated times because their pious practices are unrecognised. Instead, they opt for alternatives such as grouping prayers at the start and end of the day or finding discreet spaces in which to pray. Fadil (2009) discusses the challenges faced by orthodox and devout Muslim women, such as avoiding shaking hands with specific individuals, but only when this will not offend others' liberal sensibilities. In so doing, Fadil (2009) argues that these women remain caught between their own religious beliefs and the expectations of a liberal society. On the other hand, Kejanlioğlu & Tas (2009) highlight the inner conflict experienced by Turkish women who wear wigs to university to adhere to Islamic modesty. Such a compromise is seen as not fully meeting the modesty requirements of their faith. Women have expressed their frustrations with the conflicting expectations placed on their appearance through public protests, such as burning wigs and shaving their heads.

These studies reveal the daily challenges that religious and national secularist narratives posed in European public spaces, as well as the academic examination of Muslim women's faith-based self-fashioning practices, which are shaped by Islamophobic attitudes. This highlights the individualized practices of the ethical self of Muslim women living in the UK and European cities and how these women contribute to, adjust, confront, or reinforce these dominant powers in self-authored ways. Such women were responding to a specific political period during which non-Muslims perceived Islam as a monolithic threat. This study furthers these discussions by exploring the intersection of gender, migration, kinship, and Muslim female subjectivity during heightened immigration restrictions in the United Kingdom and how legal, familial, and social institutions intersect in shaping migrant women's ethical self-becoming.

Muslim women's ethical self-cultivation in the context of Islamic revivalist movements

I shall now turn to the scholarly examination of Islamic revival movements and studies on Muslim women's engagement in deliberate practices of ethical self-cultivation. Such studies are undertaken against the backdrop of narratives of fundamentalist Islam and the rise of secularization. This influential body of work in the anthropology of Islam draws on Aristotelian concepts of ethical self-cultivation, emphasizing daily bodily practices as individual endeavours by interlocutors. Few pivotal studies, with some exceptions, such as those of Ahmed (2021) and Liberatore (2013), are based in the secular West. By focusing on women's ethical self-becoming in a more recent political climate, this thesis seeks to add to this academic discussion.

As described in this study, deliberate ethical self-cultivation involves participating in local Islamic revivalist movements, study groups, or prayer collectives, all of which are part of the broader Islamic revivalist movement that has been active since at least the 1970s (Mahmood 2005: 3). These studies show that, rather than acquiring and practising faith from one's family through socialization and in subconscious, embodied ways, individuals make a concerted effort to cultivate themselves towards piety through learning and outward behavioural practices. In this context, individuals can

develop and refine their moral self by participating in learning, attending classes, and engaging in outward practices such as submission to Allah's (God) will, prayer, ethical dress, demeanour, and practising *sabar* (patience and forbearance).

For example, in Mahmood's seminal (2001; 2012) studies, women belonging to the piety movement in Cairo's mosques are mainly concerned with cultivating submission to what its members interpret as Allah's will (Mahmood 2012: xi). They attend weekly classes, participate in discussions, and support each other in their practices of piety. Mahmood also suggests that, rather than an unconscious Bordieuan habitus through which dispositions are embodied (2012: 136), her interlocutors' piety entails training the body, emotions, and reason until religious virtues acquire embodied habits (2005: 212). Mahmood draws from an Aristotelian model of ethical pedagogy here, in which external performative acts (such as prayers) create corresponding inward dispositions (2012: 135). Mahmood builds on the work of Foucault, who allows us to think of ethics as relating to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which particular ethical subjects are formed (2012: 8).

Similarly, Schulz (2008) has studied how Muslim women in a women's religious group in Mali, Africa, achieved Islamic moral renewal by emphasizing the importance of proper behaviour and correct '*dhikr*' (ritual performance) and engaging in sermons. Shannon (2004) studied the ritual invocation of Allah through prayer and body movement in formal gatherings by Muslims in Aleppo, Syria, which represented a way to pray to Allah and enter physical and emotional states promoting spiritual transformation. Hamdy (2009), on the other hand, studied a group of young men in Egypt who suffered from kidney failure. She argued that her interlocutors actively worked on themselves to accept Allah's will in the face of their limited options for recovery or a kidney transplant. They did this through the daily practice of cultivating *sabar* and '*tawakkul*' (complete faith and reliance in Allah). Hamdy (2009) argued that this is not passive Muslim fatalism; instead, it represents an acceptance of divine will, which her interlocutors work hard to cultivate and preserve in the face of life's challenges.

These studies illustrate pious self-cultivation through daily behaviours and repeated practices. It is important to note that these accounts are part of a particular discursive tradition (Asad 2009), focusing on people belonging to revival movements, prayer groups, or collectives with shared experiences. Despite presenting this practice as a form of individual training, it is also clearly undertaken with support from others, demonstrating the relational aspects of ethical practices (which I shall consider further below) and self-cultivation. Second, these studies consider practices of ethical self-cultivation guided by a discursive tradition. This leads to coherent practices devoid of ambiguity, confusion, or instability, which overlooks the complexity and negotiations of everyday lived experiences (see Abenante 2014; Al-deen; Mittermaier 2012; 2020; Schielke 2009: S37).

In response to such coherent accounts, Schielke's (2009) study of the behaviour of young men in the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis, Egypt, showed how men engaged with and appropriated Islamic revivalist ideals of perfection during and after the holy month of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. In this case, men embody different views and experiences that do not conform to the ideals of perfection underpinning Islamic revivalist ideals. Similarly, Janson's (2016) study of the moral negotiations of Gambian young people illustrates that this is a process fraught with

fragmentation, ambiguity, and incoherence. These young men were forced to negotiate between conservative and modern lifestyles, which they were eager to follow, while at the same time wanting to participate in the reform movements of *Tablighi Jama'at and Salafiya.*

In addition to studies concerning ethical self-cultivation through group participation, we witness similar trends in studies of ethical self-cultivation concerning people outside group participation. On the one hand, these studies show an element of consistency across practices of ethical self-cultivation. For example, Gökariksel (2009) illustrates how women in Istanbul use their body and veiling to engage in pious self-cultivation.[18] On the other hand, studies have also highlighted some ambiguity in practices of ethical self-cultivation, which shift across generations and under the influences of different political contexts. For example, Akhtar (2014) examines how Pakistani Muslim women in the United Kingdom negotiate the question of migration across generations. At first, women migrants were concerned with maintaining a connection back home, where religion was a constant, which they sought to pass on to the next generation. However, owing to fears about their children adopting the secular nature of their host country, parents enforced religion less for piety reasons than as a way of maintaining a sense of identity. However, as the second and third generations of girls matured and reached their teens, they began to use religion to question their parents' cultural practices. For them, this was not about what family or community members thought was right; instead, they wanted to live by the commands of their religion. After meeting other Muslims and witnessing various practices, this generation began questioning their practices, arriving at their own answers (Akhtar 2014: 234-5).

In a study of Somali Muslim women in the United Kingdom, Liberatore (2016) shows how younger women engage with faith differently from their mothers. With exteriority seen as lacking reflexivity, young women adopt a less ritualistic and obligatory approach to religion. Instead, they pay more attention to their spiritual and emotional connection with God and prioritize their inner self's relationship with Him (2016: 789-92). More recently, Ahmed (2021) has studied Sunni Muslim female religious scholars of Gujarati-Indian origin in Leicester, United Kingdom, examining a multi-year syllabus for women offered at a local Deobandi seminary, where such women begin their journey to become pious Muslims. Ahmed (2021) argues that although her interlocutors strive to show Islam as an all-encompassing, timeless source of guidance, their efforts are also interwoven with secular-liberal registers. In line with Liberatore (2013; 2016), Ahmed (2021) contrasts the concerns and efforts of these third-generation Muslim women with those of older generations, tracing the historical shifts and continuities influenced by and linked to political debates and debates about being British Muslims. Ahmed (2021) also demonstrates how Muslim women critically intervene in these debates, with the methods employed changing, diverging, and multiplying across generations.

This body of work takes individuals actively working towards ethical self-cultivation as its starting point. Such individuals either join religious groups, engage in an individual process of self-reflection, or make concerted efforts to bring about behavioural changes to ensure their ethical self-cultivation. The outcome of these efforts is, at times, coherent and seamless, and at other times, ambiguous, fragmented, and non-linear, often because of the surrounding media, political,

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[18] For an example of a turn to veiling driven by a complex relationship with Western modernity in Lahore, Pakistan, see Maqsood (2013: 94-9).

or familial forces. Amid changing political contexts, shifts occur across the generations, which leads to a more conscious fashioning of identities and ethical self-cultivation.

Like the subjects of these studies, my interlocutors' experiences have been profoundly shaped by specific immigration policies and political moments in the United Kingdom. My research examines how young faith-based women navigate the challenges of coming to the United Kingdom and facing broken transnational marriages and family relationships within a context of harsh anti-migrant policies and conditions. These women navigate stringent immigration rules, worsening austerity measures affecting benefits, housing, legal and medical services, increasing job insecurity, tightening welfare policies, and growing hostility towards migrants.

I began my fieldwork with an open mind, allowing the findings to emerge naturally. Indeed, it was not my initial intention to focus exclusively on Muslim South Asian women. However, without any deliberate intent, I found that the participants in my study were predominantly Muslim women. I also observed that these women were not focused solely on piety, religious practices, or the deliberate development of ethical values. Instead, firmly entrenched punitive social, familial, and legal structures shaped their daily lives. Nevertheless, I did observe that these women regularly engaged in their religious commitments maintained *tawakkul*, prayed daily, fasted, and practised *sabar*. Hope (not evoked in a religious sense) and forbearance (grounded in faith) were especially evident in my fieldwork, and I have dedicated Chapters Three and Eight, respectively, to discussing these findings.

Subsequently, the findings that have emerged have led me to focus on understanding broader social, cultural, or individual processes that intersect with but are not limited to, religious practices and beliefs. Therefore, this study does not aim to question my interlocutors' piety or ethical self-cultivation through their religious practices, nor is it an examination of 'everyday Islam' in the sense of analysing inconsistencies, incoherences, and behaviours that might seem to fall outside the boundaries of religious directives, as described in the studies above. Instead, I follow Deeb's (2015: 94) approach by asking how different understandings of morality and ethical action, both religious and otherwise, intersect in the lives of these women and their ethical selves as they persevere through their challenges, which sometimes involve moments of crisis.

Consequently, this thesis seeks to explore the ethical self-becoming of South Asian migrant brides who are practising Muslims. Focusing on how they live through their experiences, interactions, and reflections, it examines how they navigate and respond to the hardships they face. The study also considers the effects of the interconnected dynamics of punitive familial, legal, social, and economic structures as these women face the challenges associated with transnational marriage breakdown, particularly without their natal families nearby.

Ethical action, moral dilemmas, and moral breakdown

The start of the millennium witnessed an 'ethical turn' in anthropology, with studies making a concerted effort to shift away from a Durkheimian view[19] of ethics and morality, understood as a socially integrated system of rules that compels people into obedience, or a Boasian view, according to which people abide by their cultural rules as a result of enculturation (see Laidlaw 2002). Scholarly works identify two predominant approaches in the study of local moralities. In one, the focus is on dispositional or virtue ethics, studying the practices and techniques of ethical self-cultivation, as seen in the Anthropology of Islam, which I mentioned earlier. Such studies focus on how ethical self-cultivation comes about through everyday conscious practice, which people undertake to attune themselves to moral persons by developing their moral capacities. The aforementioned studies of Islam's piety movements fall under this category.

Mattingly (2012; 2014), on the other hand, adopts an approach centred on 'first-person virtue ethics', focusing on the individual as the central moral subject. Through the lens of caregiving, Mattingly examines the moral actions of US-based African American parents, emphasizing their uncertainty in achieving their goals, the risks they take, and how they experiment in pursuit of these goals. These struggles form part of their daily lives and reflect the 'best good' they strive for in their ethical practices (see also Mattingly 2012: 179). Mattingly (2014) notes that when parents confront their children's suffering, it forces them into an 'unexpected and unwanted project of becoming'. In such moments, suffering can create new or intensified moral responsibilities (Mattingly 2014: 23). By analysing the care people provide, Mattingly (2014) presents a framework for understanding moral actions in the context of everyday challenges, particularly when caring for others, such as in the case of parents of sick children. Care work requires parents to develop virtues to become 'good enough' parents. This process involves creating 'communities of care' extending beyond the immediate family to neighbours, friends, other parents, and healthcare professionals. These long-term efforts can prompt critical reflection on one's life. According to Mattingly, the driving force behind these transformative actions is the 'care of intimate others,' with care leading to an 'unexpected and unwanted project of becoming' that extends over time and establishes a need for a community of carers (Mattingly 2014: 23).

Another approach is the reason and choice approach (Howell 1997: 14-15; Robbins 2004: 315-16; Laidlaw 2002). In this context, one line of study focuses on virtues. For virtue ethicists, the central task is to explain the virtues and vices that are central to people's ability to thrive and flourish within a socially and historically located form of ethical life (Laidlaw 2017: 6). Lambek (2010) emphasizes the significance of everyday life in understanding ethics, arguing that human actions and speech deeply embed ethical principles. He contends that virtue is not a fixed or universal concept but rather a function of contingent circumstances and specific contexts. Therefore, evaluating an act as virtuous is not determined by strict adherence to predefined rules but rather by the quality of judgement it reflects. In this sense, judgment is an ongoing process that involves discerning when and how to act based on established criteria. Within this framework, individuals generally lead moral lives, with their actions and speech reflecting their ethical orientations.

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[19] In the critique of Kant, who argued that morality is a universal and priori notion shared by all rational beings and enacted through practical reason

Ordinary ethics can be likened to the capacity to maintain the equilibrium of social normativity (Zigon & Thoorp 2014).

In sum, Lambek (2010) offers a framework for studying everyday moral actions to maintain the equilibrium of social normativity (see also Zigon & Thoorp 2014). Mahmood, on the other hand, examines active self-cultivation through daily practices, while Mattingly offers a way to approach the intensified moral responsibilities involved in caring for others. Although studies of everyday moral practices and the daily struggles of caregiving provide a way to consider the everyday, unexpected moral journeys, this approach does not fully account for the personal moral experiences shaped by specific historical moments influenced by social, political, or economic events and the relational challenges they bring; or, as Zigon (2007: 133) suggests, a breakdown that shakes one out of the 'everydayness' of being moral and the actions produced in such moments, which he calls a 'moral breakdown'.

In Zigon's (2007) study of the personal moral breakdown experienced by people in post-Soviet Moscow when faced with drastic political and economic changes, 'moral breakdown' is based on the notion that people rarely consciously think about being moral on an everyday basis. Instead, Zigon (2007) argues that, in our daily lives, we assume an unreflective state with a moral disposition of everyday ethical life. In such cases, Zigon (2007) contends that morality is best understood as the dispositions enacted non-intentionally and unreflectively, which evolve as we engage with others, form relationships, and live with a sense of familiarity and mutual understanding. He contrasts this state with moments of breakdown. In such moments, to return to our everyday unreflective state and moral life, reasoning and making choices become the only way to perform ethics. A distinction is thus drawn here between morality as an unreflective mode and the ethics performed in a moment of breakdown (Zigon 2007: 133-7).

Zigon (2007; 2008; 2014) thus employs the framework of moral breakdown to distinguish between every day, unreflective moral dispositions and more focused ethical action. During a moral breakdown, he argues that people face a moral demand to reflect on the ethical dilemma at hand. Zigon understands a moral breakdown as an interruption of the everyday, forcing a person to notice that something out of the ordinary, possibly out of control, has happened, forcing them to step away and reflect. In this stepped-away mode, individuals become subjective, objective, present, aware, and conscious (Zigon 2007: 136). Zigon suggests that the performance of ethics occurs during a moral breakdown or an ethical dilemma. These are moments of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy for people, which occur in specific situations or complicated situational relationships (2007: 137).

During such dilemmas, the individual must step away from, reflect on, and work through things to deal with the situation (Zigon 2007). As Zigon (2007) argues, 'it is in the moment of breakdown…people work on themselves, and in so doing, alter their very way of being in the world' (2007: 138). In such instances, he argues, the primary goal of ethics is to move back to dwell in the unreflective comfort of the familiar. Zigon (2007) argues that, in times of moral breakdown, people confront their ethical dilemmas and 'keep going' because they wish to return to a state of unreflective morality. Zigon (2007: 139) draws on Badiou's (2001) maxim of 'keep going' here, which suggests that, irrespective of the dilemma faced in the ethical moment, one must remain

committed to finding a resolution. In line with Zigon (2007) and following Badiou (2001), I understand 'keep[ing] going' as an act of perseverance to get through an ethical moment, irrespective of the difficulties, struggles, or temptations faced in that moment.

Following Zigon (2007), I believe that it is helpful to distinguish between morality and ethics when examining my interlocutors' experiences. Ethics (Zigon 2007) involves a personal response to ethical dilemmas, particularly during moments of moral breakdown. Conversely, morality is the unreflective way of being in the world, where one typically acts without thinking consciously about moral principles. I would argue that Zigon overstates this view, as this overlooks moments when morality does come into consciousness, such as when rules and norms (religious or otherwise) become overtly or covertly palpable in daily life. This distinction is nonetheless a helpful starting point for my analysis, which I shall set out below.

Analytical Approach

In the following section, I first introduce the framework of 'ethical (re)positioning', which forms the analytical approach adopted in this thesis. Next, I examine the secondary framework of 'carceral escapes' and the concept of 'multiple ethical dilemmas'.

'Ethical (re)positioning'

The framework of 'ethical (re)positionings' has proved useful in examining my interlocutors' self-becoming, which I understand as a process of becoming through their experiences, interactions, and reflections rather than through deliberate practices, such as participating in religious studies or groups (Mahmood 2012), as they navigate complex life events. I developed this concept by employing Holland & Leander's (2004) notions of 'positioning' and 'lamination', coupled with the framework of social navigation (Vigh 2009). This conceptual framework has helped me to examine the challenges that certain South Asian Muslim women migrants facing transnational marriage breakdown deal with at an interpersonal, temporal, spatial, and inter-institutional (legal, medical, familial) level. This highlights the secondary framework of 'carceral escapes' and the notion of 'multiple ethical dilemmas' experienced by women in such contexts.

I believe that the concept of 'ethical (re)positioning' helps shed light on my interlocutors' process of self-becoming as they undergo multiple (re)positionings, carceral escapes, and multiple ethical dilemmas across different rites of passage, life events, and institutional, familial, and geopolitical spaces. This is a robust framework for studying various migration contexts within the complex global migration landscape.

I will first set out the notion of self-becoming employed in this thesis.

Self-becoming

I understand self-becoming as an ongoing process of lived experiences, as a product of 'social relationships and interactions' (Long & Moore 2013: 2). As Long & Moore (2013) argue,

interdependence, co-production, and co-constitution characterize these relationships. People understand the world in which they live, face and survive challenges, and undergo a process of self-becoming through a 'dynamic and interactive relational matrix' which they create. Through the study of people's actions and behaviours, several foundational studies have highlighted various pathways of self-becoming. For example, Butler (1993; 1999) underscores that the repetition of socially prescribed behaviours shapes gender, described as an act of 'performativity'. For Butler, self-becoming is a fluid process that involves navigating and often subverting norms and expectations imposed on a person and allowing new ways to emerge. Turner (1997), on the other hand, studies how people act during rites of passage that create a liminal space where individuals exist in 'betwixt and between' social roles that contribute to self-becoming.

In contrast, in a study of Egyptian women actively working on their piety, Mahmood (2005; 2012) sees self-becoming as taking place through conscious bodily actions and performances of piety, leading to the self-cultivation of a pious self. Studying the aftermath of violence during India's partition, Das (2007) explores how violence seeps into the everyday and affects gender and subjectivity, where self-becoming takes place through everyday actions. Solomon (2012) studied human-dog relationships to examine self-becoming. She shows how humans and animals co-shape one another in an ongoing manner through their actions and interactions, in which there is a 'doing, being and becoming with each other' (Solomon 2012: 110). While it may appear ordinary, such an interaction is, in fact, transformative, especially with children affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD), because it allows them to enter a 'figured world' where new opportunities become available to them.

In her study of migrant sex workers in London, Gutiérrez Garza (2013) examines self-becoming through downward mobility, undocumented status, and illegality in intimate labour. She demonstrates how, through everyday acts, women construct spaces of temporary normality in their daily lives, separate from the intimate labour they perform. This allows them to 'reconstruct their persons' while living within the limited options of their experiences as intimate migrant labourers. In contrast, for Eastern Indonesian Catholic nuns, the lifelong process of self-becoming occurs in the company of others experiencing the same obligations and expectations, allowing them to advance and grow as good, moral, and religious subjects. In their case, self-becoming is an everyday act and process of understanding oneself. This involves attempting to uncover each other and determining who everyone 'is' and what unites them as a community. (Donnelly 2022: 22). My study seeks to add to this rich body of scholarship through the framework of 'ethical (re)positioning'. To this end, I shall examine the question of self-becoming by exploring the interweaving structural and personal influences and challenges within each (re)position women occupy while navigating multiple challenging life events. I shall examine how women's social flux and challenges produce overlapping and interweaving experiences across time and place. These experiences produce complex social and emotional individuals who use these experiences to react and respond in the process of self-becoming. Along with action, I shall also explore the structures with which women must contend during each repositioning.

Next, I shall explain the terms '(re)positioning', social navigation, lamination, and ethical (re)positioning, and how they come together to develop the concept of 'ethical (re)positioning'.

(Re)positioning

I understand 'positioning' in terms of a broader productive social process as well as a process of micro-production of the self that comes to inhabit and personify a particular position (Holland & Leander 2004: 127-30). In some cases, positionings occur when people are offered or invited to occupy a specific position, such as that of a chairperson. They can also occur during particular dialogues, for example, in a classroom (Wortham 2004). Positioning can take hours of delicate crafting, such as positioning a bride and groom in a wedding album (Adrian 2004). It can also occur when people unite as activists (Satterfield 2004). Sometimes, over extended periods, a cultural persona is developed, for example, that of a trafficker along Mexico's borders, or that of 'the genius', 'the stupid', 'the illiterate', 'the working classes', etc, in Western social life. These can circulate and become imbued into and by persons creating particular social positionings (Edberg 2004; McDermott 2004). One can also assume a cultural identity, which is not an essence but rather a positioning, involving points of racial, ethnic, or cultural identification (Hall 1990: 226 cited in Dwyer 1999: 54).

Such positions can become relatively stable in people's social and personal lives, shaping how others perceive and treat them. However, such stability is not always guaranteed, as positions can shift or fail to take hold. In some cases, they can occur through difficult relationships that people dodge from, fall into or escape. Whatever the response, however, social positioning creates a sense of self, a power relationship, and a social, familial, or institutionalized persona. Social positioning creates persons and personhood and contributes to people's subjective experiences (Holland & Leander 2004: 127-30). As we shall see, in the face of significant life events and challenges, my interlocutors all became subject to various positionings; these pivotal moments involved social, legal, medical, and economic changes that influenced one another. I would argue that my interlocutors experienced recurring '(re)positionings'.

For women such as Fatima, the process began back home. In their position as young women and daughters anticipating marriage, women in this position maintain a respectful self-conduct, hoping to find a happy match. Some women accept an arranged marriage proposal, while others are forced into marriage. Following this, women become positioned as betrothed to men from abroad. After their '*nikah*' (Islamic wedding) in their homeland, they become positioned as married women, patiently and, in some cases, anxiously and fearfully waiting for their in-laws to organize their spousal visas. After that, they are positioned as migrant brides on spousal visas who travel to the United Kingdom and face the daunting task of starting a new life in a new country and family. Here, they assume the position of daughters-in-law, sisters-in-law, and wives, working hard to adjust and make their marriages work. However, their experiences of domestic abuse position them as unhappy spouses. In some cases, they even fear for their lives.

After fleeing this abuse or being handed over to the police by their in-laws, these women find themselves positioned as immigrants with a terminated spousal visa, facing threats of deportation. They are now also shamefully positioned as women in marriages that have broken down and stigmatized as separated women. When the UK Home Office legally accepts that they have experienced abuse, they are officially positioned as victims of domestic abuse, which supports their

immigration application. They then occupy the position of asylum seekers living in UK Home Office-provided accommodation or of immigrants who are victims of domestic abuse living in a women's refuge. They face an anxious, lengthy wait to be granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom. Once my interlocutors are granted such rights, with scant English and digital skills and poor job prospects, they find themselves positioned as destitute and homeless. They transition to life as single women on benefits, who must navigate out of welfare into paid employment. Therefore, in their broken-down transnational marriages, my interlocutors continually face and inhabit several (re)positions. Studying self-becoming through the concept of (re)positioning, I seek to offer a deeper understanding of the (re)positioning of the self in migratory contexts.

Social navigation

To comprehensively examine the challenges my interlocutors face, I build on the concept of (re)positioning by incorporating Vigh's (2009) framework of social navigation into my approach. Vigh argues that social navigation is not a straightforward journey along a fixed path. Rather, it is a movement through shifting, unstable social environments. To highlight the complexity of this process and the dynamic interplay between personal actions and social forces, Vigh describes navigation as 'motion squared' (Vigh 2009: 433), emphasizing that our actions unfold within a volatile and uncertain environment, where individuals and their social surroundings continuously influence and reshape each other. The notion of 'motion squared' acknowledges people's position within a social field, recognizing that this not only shapes their actions and positionings, but that they also move one another, creating a sense of 'motion within motion' or 'motion squared'. Across their (re)positions, the women in my study navigate social environments with actors and institutions that influence their movements. Interweaving (re)positions and social navigation provides a useful analytical lens to examine how such women manage social flux and change (Vigh 2009: 420) while undergoing multiple (re)positionings.

Lamination

To examine the shifts in subjectivity that take place across the various (re)positionings my interlocutors navigate as part of a 'motion squared' dynamic (Vigh 2009), I employ the metaphor of 'lamination' (Holland & Leander 2004). Lamination involves the creation of hybrid social and psychological entities through a layering of experiences over time. Just as drums are built from layers of wood and cymbals from layers along different axes, this layering process imparts qualities such as resonance, strength, and depth. Over time, these layers evolve, thickening and deepening the texture of experience, while each layer retains its distinctiveness within a new configuration – something that a single layer alone cannot achieve (Holland & Leander 2004).

The concept of lamination offers a useful way to study the formation of subjectivities through the repeated (re)positioning that my interlocutors socially navigate. It highlights how each (re)positioning adds layers of positive or negative experiences – memories, emotions, thoughts, bodily reactions, words, ideas, and learning. These layers accumulate and interact with each new positioning, creating a complex, interwoven structure that responds in real time to new situations. Lamination also highlights the importance of physical objects, such as certificates, medical notes, legal documents, and personal belongings, which people carry, lose, or leave behind. These objects

and repeated experiences 'thicken' as the memories and artefacts from past positionings become layered onto one another. Moreover, these layers are permeable, meaning that any layer can resonate with a current event or positioning, influencing the person's response or reaction in the present moment (Holland & Leander 2004: 132).

Incorporating the concepts of social navigation and lamination adds to the idea of (re)positioning, broadening and deepening the analytical lens. As I shall explain next, this provides a way to understand ethical action and self-becoming in the face of multiple life challenges and across (re)positionings.

'The Politics of Ethical (Re)positioning': A Conceptual Framework

Following Stafford (2010: 188), I understand morality as a set of rules, norms, and conventions by which to judge human behaviours. Ethical action, on the other hand, is virtuous, subjectively understood, and undertaken by an individual. Although, as Stafford (2010) underscores, such a distinction between ethics and morals is far from unproblematic, it nonetheless highlights the role of thinking and judgment in moral life. It reminds us that, via (ethical) thinking and judgment, moral rules, norms, or conventions are shifted, broken, or intentionally opposed. Consequently, ethical action draws our attention to the first-person stance of an experiencing, acting subject, the person for whom, from whom, and toward whom moral life emanates (Zigon & Thoorp 2014: 7), both religious and otherwise. In addition, when considering ethical actions, coupling this with the concepts of social navigation (Vigh 2009) and lamination (Holland & Leander 2004) helps to move beyond the perspective of first-person experience to the space of 'relational being' (Zigon 2014), or being-with-others (see Jackson 1998, cited in Zigon & Thoorp 2014).

Relational beings do not only imply the co-presence of others. It can also be understood as the voice of such individuals in one's head (despite geographical distance), their presence in one's prayers (Desjarlais 2014), or being connected through divine interventions (Mittermaier 2012) and relationships (Williamson 2022) or the imagination (Moore 2011). It is also an experience of intersubjectivity, which has social and cultural, subjective and reflective, imaginative and practical, and existential and bodily dimensions. This highlights how ethics is formulated in 'the space between persons' (see Parish 2014) and in structures over time and space. The concept of 'ethical (re)positioning' thus includes the imagined and natural intermediary spaces between the subject and object, self and other, actor and situation, over time and space, during which moral sensibilities evolve, and moments of ethical reflections arise and are constituted, contested, or transformed (Zigon & Thoorp 2014: 7-8).

This framework offers a rigorous means of understanding how subjective ethical experiences, actions, imaginations, and processes of ethical self-becoming unfold through shifting (re)positionings and changing social forces over time and space. Importantly, it highlights the relational dynamics that shape people and influence ethical actions and self-becoming. Using the concept of 'ethical (re)positioning', I aim to shed light on the multiple forces and structures – familial, legal, social, personal, medical, and economic – that influence and constrain individuals as they navigate their individual circumstances.

Analysing my findings through the lens of the 'ethical (re)positioning' led to the development of a supplementary framework, 'carceral escapes', as well as the concept of 'multiple ethical dilemmas', which I shall describe in more detail in the following sections.

'Carceral escapes': A supplementary framework

When examining my findings through the framework of 'ethical (re)positioning', it became clear that my interlocutors had moved from one carceral setting to the next. This led to the development of the 'carceral escapes' framework (as set out in Chapter Four). Here, I employ the definition of carceral proposed by human geographers Moran *et al.* (2018) (as detailed in Chapter Three). In their study, they apply this concept outside the realm of penal studies, positing that the carceral involves an interplay of three carceral conditions. The first is detriment. By this, Moran *et al.* (2018) refer to the lived experiences of harm and the confiscation of opportunity or potentiality that would otherwise be available, which social actors subjectively experience as detrimental. The second condition is intention, which focuses on individuals' lived experience of a detriment rather than how it was intended by controlling authorities (2018: 677), considering how its effects may persist in the long term. The third carceral condition is spatiality. This relates to a space or spaces to which detrimental intentions relate. Together, these three carceral conditions create the experience of carcerality. In relation to the term 'escape', I draw from academic discourse on escape theory (Heatherton & Baumeister 1991), according to which the outcomes of an escape can be unintended and range from relief to non-relief. In this juxtaposition of carceral and escape, I follow Ortner (2016: 65), who suggests that notions at variance with each should be understood as actively interacting, as this helps us to assess how they limit, form, and deform each other.

The concept of 'carceral escapes' points to the recurring nature of carceral experiences. Over the course of my interlocutors' life experiences, such experiences are repeated unabatingly, both structurally and interpersonally, across time and geographies. They are enforced in different spaces by various institutions and social actors, with enduring effects. Second, it interrogates how people experience the effects of one form of carcerality seeping into the next. Third, it highlights the embeddedness of the carceral in the fabric of the escape, whereby the notion of a true escape is negated, and an escape from one context simply results in another manifestation of the carceral in the following one. Fourth, it recognizes the indeterminate outcomes of each carceral escape. The notion of 'carceral escapes' thus points to the dynamic of successive longitudinal carcerality in broken transnational marriages, with domestic abuse, deportation threats, destitution, and acute vulnerability experienced by certain immigrant spouses.

Multiple ethical dilemmas'

The 'ethical (re)positioning' framework revealed that my interlocutors faced persistent, complex ethical challenges. For example, while leaving an abusive marriage meant putting an end to their abuse, it also entailed marital breakdown, which the women did not want. A decision to take a cash-in-hand job was unlawful and dishonest, but it was also a means to earn money, gain work experience, and obtain better job prospects. In the cases studied here, as I shall explain below, my interlocutors faced several ethical dilemmas where there was no clear choice since any decision

they made would involve loss, discomfort, and ethical dilemmas. They were left feeling uncertain as to what the right choice was, an experience that I term 'multiple ethical dilemmas'.

However, unlike Zigon (2007), their responses to these ethical dilemmas were sometimes reactive and unpredictable. For instance, after practising forbearance to uphold their marriage, when women faced life-threatening events in their marital homes, they reacted spontaneously, fleeing their homes without any personal belongings, prior planning, or reflection on the consequences of their actions (as explained in Chapters Three, Four, and Seven). This immediate reaction contrasts with Zigon's concept of stepping back to reflect and address the situation thoughtfully (Zigon 2007: 136-7). Such events reveal that, in certain critical situations, immediate reactions, rather than a deliberate reflection on the ethical dilemmas involved, are necessary.

Zigon (2007) further argues that people's ethical actions are motivated by the demand to 'keep going', as they wish to return to a place of reflectivity and comfort, within the realm of the familiar – a return to a state of unreflective morality (2007: 138). In contrast, the concept of 'multiple ethical dilemmas' reveals how my interlocutors 'keep going' to survive the repeated predicaments they face, where a return to normality is rare. For example, Irum and Shazia face the ethical dilemma of either dissenting to save themselves from forced marriages or agreeing to the marriage to maintain their family's honour and avoid their anger (as explored in Chapter Three). Or, when Bilquis lost her unborn child as a result of physical abuse, she faced the ethical dilemma of returning to possibly more abuse or leaving and breaking down her home and marriage (see Chapter Seven). In Irum's, Shazia's and Lubna's cases, marital breakdown also led to their disownment by their families. They, however, did not wish to break their relationships with their parents and siblings. When the women in my study leave their marriages, they immediately face another ethical dilemma – either to return to their homeland or remain in the United Kingdom. Returning home is filled with ambiguity for some and is impossible for others. However, remaining in the United Kingdom involves economic and legal precarity and a difficult life of loneliness (as explained in Chapters Three, Four, and Seven).

Some women are cheated and exploited. For example, Irum experiences domestic servitude. While she does receive professional advice to leave, leaving would lead to her being alone. Lacking the linguistic, digital, and bureaucratic knowledge needed to face life in the United Kingdom, her ability to stay safe is hindered. Staying, on the other hand, would entail her safety, but would mean remaining under her friend Aisha's control (see Chapter Four). In Bilquis' case, in the face of poverty, she is confronted with the ethical dilemma of accepting cash-in-hand work to gain work experience. She knows that this is fraudulent and dishonest, but it would help her economically and allow her to gain some skills to improve her chances of getting a proper, legal job (see Chapter Six). When Bilquis and Lubna enter a romantic relationship, and their partners refuse to marry them, both women face a huge ethical dilemma. Staying is against their faith, but leaving would lead to loneliness and, in Lubna's case, losing the option of obtaining legal citizenship through marriage (see Chapter Seven). In the face of such tough ethical dilemmas, these women are plagued by uncertainty.

Such ethnographic cases further contribute to Zigon's arguments concerning moments of 'moral breakdown'. However, the concept of 'multiple ethical dilemmas' sheds further light on the

overwhelming, repeated ethical dilemmas with which people struggle, which lead to various outcomes. As I shall demonstrate in the following chapters, such dilemmas include women facing abuse, deportation, poor mental health, and destitution, as well as desperate acts of self-harm or pharmaceutical overdosing to achieve respite from emotional stress. In such cases, the possibility of returning to a place of comfort, familiarity, and reflectivity, as explored by Zigon (2007), is almost impossible. Throughout the chapters, I shall therefore present 'multiple ethical dilemmas' faced by women, where a return to normality is rare and where women are faced with a life-threatening situation.

In sum, the 'ethical (re)positioning' framework offers a systemic approach to understanding the ethical self-becoming of Muslim women who face challenges as they are (re)positioned in broken marriages, domestic abuse, deportation, and settlement in the United Kingdom,[20] all within the complex context of global and local geopolitics, anti-Muslim narratives, and anti-migrant rhetoric.

Moreover, I am hopeful that this concept will offer a comprehensive approach to understanding the lived experiences of migrants, particularly in contexts shaped by gender, class, race, economic and political migration, family breakdown and loss, illegality, and settlement in host countries. 'Ethical (re)positioning' helps to situate these experiences within the intricate network of immigration policies and the various interconnected geopolitical, legal, medical, social, familial, and economic bureaucracies and personal dynamics that evolve across time and space.

Chapter Outline

The following chapters are theme-based and present selected aspects of my interlocutors' experiences to substantiate my arguments. Consequently, this thesis highlights specific dimensions of the women's lives rather than seeking to present a comprehensive narrative for all ten participants. Many of the chapters commence with Irum's case, as she was not only my first interlocutor but had also recently moved out of her women's refuge. By beginning my fieldwork with her case, at this pivotal juncture, I was able to engage in first-hand observations of the settlement challenges experienced by the women in my study. This approach facilitated the collection of in-depth ethnographic data, deepened my understanding of women's issues, and allowed for a systematic investigation into how others have navigated similar challenges.

Chapters Two and Three explore these women's experiences as new brides while living back 'home' in South Asia. Chapter Two focuses on their 'hopeful waiting' during prolonged delays to their spousal visa applications by their UK-based husbands. It explores how these women navigate the pressures of upholding their family's reputation, fulfilling obligations, and coping with deliberate visa delays, all while sustaining aspirations of marriage and migration. Despite their doubts and fears, they rely on hope, which is often reinforced by conversations with their mothers, who prioritize upholding the marriage for the family's honour and kinship ties, sometimes at the expense of the daughters' interests. This chapter underscores how some young women are

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[20] The data from 2019-2020 show that there are nearly 4,300 applications for DDV concessions.

positioned as brides within kinship politics, where family honour and relationships take precedence over their own interests and well-being.

Exploring young women's experiences back home, Chapter Three examines how marriage and law interweave to carceral ends. In this chapter, I explore the experiences of young brides forced into unchallengeable forced transnational cousin marriages to maintain familial obligations, which, in order to 'keep going,' they have no choice but to endure. By examining key events such as forced marriages, educational restrictions, spousal visa delays, domestic abuse, disownment by their natal families, and their husbands reporting them to legal authorities, the chapter reveals how these dynamics contribute to the breakdown of my interlocutors' marriages. This often results in shame, social stigma, and threats of their deportation to their ancestral homelands. I argue that, in the context of intersecting punitive familial practices and legal structures, certain transnational cousin marriages possess an inherent potential to become carceral.

Building on the lived experiences described in Chapters Two and Three, Chapter Four examines women's experiences until they are granted ILR in the United Kingdom. The chapter highlights the emotional, social, and economic precarity repeatedly endured by these women during such periods. The chapter identifies the recurring carceral dynamics faced by migrant brides during their broken transnational marriages and introduces the concept of 'carceral escapes'. This framework examines the persistent nature of carceral experiences, illustrating how these experiences overlap and how attempts to escape often result in new forms of confinement, rendering the outcomes of such escapes unpredictable during challenging life events.

Chapter Five examines how, after gaining legal status in the United Kingdom, migrant women must navigate the initial settlement challenges while grappling with mental health issues, limited English and IT skills, and their unfamiliarity with the UK's bureaucratic systems. Here, I show that these women rely on 'informal go-betweens', that is, non-experts who provide ad hoc support with tasks such as applying for benefits, addressing homelessness, securing divorces, and managing banking and urgent e-government tasks. Without this assistance, which is sometimes positive and sometimes negative, these women would have risked severe consequences, including homelessness, destitution, or penalties on their benefits.

Chapter Six focuses on women's initial transition from welfare to work, as mandated by the UK benefits system. I argue that the UK's bureaucratic benefits system, underpinned by a carceral logic, operates with conditionality, prescribed commitments and sanctions. It has inbuilt standardised protocols that depersonalizes the support work coaches offer, and prioritizes regulations over individual needs. As my interlocutors attempted to move from welfare to work, a lack of language skills, work experience, CVs, and educational documents undermined women's confidence and prospects, and these bureaucratic processes implemented at Jobcentres imposed undue stress and reflected a rigid, unrealistic expectation that overlooked personal barriers. It fails to ensure employment, as demanded by some Jobcentre work coaches.

In Chapter Seven, the final substantive chapter, I analyse my interlocutors' narratives of *sabar* and the development of their *sabar* subjectivities. The women refer frequently to *sabar* as a crucial capacity that helps them navigate the harsh, restrictive challenges they face alone in a foreign

country. They describe practising *sabar* to make difficult ethical decisions and survive difficult moments, resetting this capacity through prayer, gratitude, trust, deference, and reliance on Allah*,* as well as drawing strength from supportive relationships and resilience. This chapter demonstrates the pivotal role of *sabar* in how these women 'keep going', highlighting the central influence of structural conditions and interpersonal dynamics on their capacities for and possibilities of *sabar*. The chapter further reveals that while *sabar* is a powerful, sustaining practice, it is also challenging, requiring endurance through hardship and adversity. The chapter ultimately argues that the capacity for forbearance unfolds within the challenges presented by life and devotion.

My interlocutors recognize that they are now in a more secure position, benefiting from stronger social connections, enhanced economic security, and increased emotional well-being and personal confidence. Their journey of self-becoming has taken them far from their earlier lives, when they lived with their natal family back home, awaiting a 'good marriage'. In the concluding chapter, I contend that the analytical approach of 'ethical (re)positioning' demonstrates that self-becoming is neither a conclusive 'arrival' nor an endpoint. Rather, it is an ongoing, non-linear, reflective, and reactionary process influenced by punitive structural forces, both legal and familial. The journey is influenced by human malleability, resilience, strength, and vulnerabilities, shifting across time and space. In these women's cases, their (re)positions across the various challenges and punitive structures they face take the form of dynamics for self-becoming. Such a process uncovers personal and interpersonal (im)possibilities, (un)becoming, and (under)growth, where forces act as both constraints and opportunities, which is an inevitable part of an ongoing process of self-becoming.

In Chapters Two and Three, I begin the substantive section of this thesis by exploring my interlocutors' experiences as young women living with their natal families in their ancestral homelands, anticipating a 'good marriage', followed by their experiences once they arrive in the United Kingdom.

CHAPTER TWO

HOPEFUL WAITING – NAVIGATING EXTENDED DELAYS IN SPOUSAL VISA APPLICATIONS WITHIN UK-SOUTH ASIAN TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES

Irum's Hopeful Waiting

I met Irum through Aisha, a client at a national refugee centre where I volunteered before commencing my doctoral studies. I had known Aisha for over 2 years. Aisha offered to introduce me to Irum, who was living with her, as a potential research participant. Irum then became my first interlocutor, and I began meeting with her regularly in the early days of my fieldwork. Some weeks after we met, I accompanied Irum to the Jobcentre one afternoon. On the bus journey home, Irum was quiet and seemed worried. I asked, 'Is something the matter?' in a soft voice, to which she replied, '*Kuch nahi*' ('Nothing'). She looked away, and we travelled on in silence. I knew something was amiss, but I did not want to push the matter. Instead, I simply said, 'If there is anything I can help with, please ask'. We continued in silence until, finally, she asked, 'Are you free next Monday?' I replied, 'Yes', to which Irum responded, 'Will you come to the Sharia Council with me? I don't know how to complete the *khula* (divorce initiated by a married woman) forms to start my divorce process or get to the Sharia Council'. I said, 'Sure'. The following Monday, I brought printed copies of the Sharia Council *khula* forms and instructions with me, which listed the documents Irum needed to provide to complete her *khula* application. We sat down and had a cup of tea in Aisha's flat, where Irum lived too. I took out the forms and explained all the questions she would need to answer.

One of the questions on the form asked for a description of the primary reasons for the *khula* request. As soon as I read out the question, Irum looked at me, and her eyes welled up with tears. Irum said, '*Baji bohot kuch hua*' ('Older sister, a lot happened'). I paused, put down my tea, and looked at her empathetically. Irum responded with a broken smile and then stared down at her hands. After a long pause, Irum explained, in a low voice, that she had been born into a poor household in a small Pakistani town. She lived with her mother, who had asthma; her father, the primary breadwinner, who ran a roadside '*chaat*' (street food) stall; and her two younger sisters and two younger brothers. Irum described how growing up, she had enjoyed a very loving relationship with her family and was close to her mother. Irum was a teenager when her father's UK-based first cousin phoned with a '*rishta*' (marriage proposal) for Irum to marry their son, who was 33 at the time. The two fathers agreed on the marriage without consulting Irum. She found out about her marriage arrangements that afternoon when she returned from school. Irum looked up at me and said, 'I was shocked'. Her father explained that this '*rishta*' from a wealthier cousin living abroad was a good 'match' for her and the family. Irum said she protested a great deal. She had not considered marriage, especially to someone she had never met. Irum said that her father would not budge. He had given his word and insisted that his '*izzat*' (honour) was at stake. He insisted he could never break an agreement made with a member of his *biradari*. As Irum's eyes welled up, she said, 'I felt horrified and hopeless'. Irum said that she repeatedly turned to her mother, who always

encouraged her saying, '*Ummed rakh*' ('Keep hope') and consoled her with prospects of a good life abroad. Although Irum protested vehemently, her father would not go back on his word.

The wedding was performed in Pakistan a year later. Her in-laws arrived a few days before the wedding. Irum explained that, to maintain the family's reputation and honour, she could not meet the groom. After the marriage, Irum lived with her in-laws in the adjoining neighbourhood, where they owned a home. Irum spent her time helping around the house. She did not see her husband much because he was always with his father. Irum paused and appeared embarrassed. She lowered her gaze as she described how her husband spent all his time with his father. When they slept together, he would keep to himself. He would turn his back and not get close to her physically. Irum said she felt confused. She sensed that something was wrong and raised it with her mother. In a low voice, Irum said her mother consoled her and explained that her husband was perhaps shy. Irum described how her mother continually reassured her and said that, hopefully, their relationship would settle down after Irum migrated to the United Kingdom and they were living together as a couple. Irum said her mother once again encouraged her to stay hopeful.

Irum's husband and in-laws returned to the United Kingdom after 2 weeks, and Irum returned to her natal family to wait for her in-laws to arrange her UK spousal visa. She explained that, to allow her to keep in touch with her husband, her father requested that her in-laws buy Irum a phone, but her husband never called. On her mother's advice, Irum called regularly. Irum and her mother hoped that Irum's husband would speak to her, but Irum only ever talked to her mother-in-law. Although Irum was despondent, her mother still encouraged her to remain hopeful. Irum watched her friends get married. While she was also married, unlike her friends, Irum remained living with her parents, with no marital relationship, and waiting hopefully to migrate to the United Kingdom. Irum continued to stress that her mother constantly advised her to remain hopeful.

Irum said that after a year or so, '*Mai ne hosh sambhala*' ('I became more aware'). With a shy look, she explained that her friends would gossip about 'things' in married life that she had never experienced (she meant the physical and romantic aspects of a marriage, but also difficult 'things'). Irum appeared to have discovered sex and physical relationships through her friends. She explained that she discussed this with her mother, who consoled her, saying she would experience the same soon. Irum looked at me brokenly and said that to fit into others' expectations, she made up stories about her marital relationship. Irum shot me a timid look and said she wanted to avoid embarrassment and did not want her friends to gossip about her dysfunctional marriage. In private, though, she wondered why she had not had the same experiences as them. Irum looked at me with frustration as she described her life living with her natal family in Pakistan for 7 years, during which she kept up the hope of migrating and starting her life with her husband.

I wondered whether, like Awal's (2025) interlocutors, Irum had any side relationships or encounters with men while she was waiting – relationships understood as not leading to any future commitments but rather as a source of enjoyment (2025: 132-3). I did not ask, however. Irum explained that a relative who had recently returned from the United Kingdom told her that Irum's husband was unfit and unemployed. I wondered how Irum and her family responded to this but waited for her to say more. Irum said that her mother described the comments as unfounded. She suggested that the relative was simply jealous because Irum had married abroad into a wealthy

family. Irum explained that she had no choice but to endure the wait. Being very young, she was curious about marital relationships and continued to harbour hope that she would soon experience a good married life.

Irum's in-laws made excuses for not arranging her visa but continued supporting her family financially. She explained that, as a humble family, they could not overpower her wealthy in-laws. Finally, Irum convinced her father to ask her in-laws to plan for Irum's UK spousal visa because then she would be able to make her marriage work (Irum explained that as the poorer relative, her father could never forcefully demand things from her in-laws). I sensed some hope in Irum and a belief that once she was with her husband, she could make her marriage work. Irum said she insisted that her father say something to her in-laws. Finally, after a great deal of gentle persuasion on his part, Irum's in-laws arranged her spousal visa 7 years after the marriage, and she finally migrated to the United Kingdom. Irum and her mother sincerely hoped that things would settle once she and her husband lived together. She explained that their regular chats and her mother's constant encouragement to remain hopeful helped her face the 7-year-long wait.

I decided to write this chapter after speaking to my interlocutors Farah, Saira, and Razia, who, like Irum, were betrothed to South Asian men from the United Kingdom and expected to migrate and commence their married lives. Instead, they also faced long waits (ranging from 1 to 7 years) because their in-laws delayed their spousal visa applications. In this challenging situation, they regularly mentioned the hope fostered through mother-daughter conversations that things would work out and they would settle into a 'happy married life'. This subtext of hope in the face of these challenges caught my attention. This is what inspired me to write this chapter, with a view to understanding how these women's self-becoming unfolded in this initial phase. To examine their individual cases, I have adopted the 'ethical (re)positioning' analytical approach. I analyse the positioning of these women as young brides within their specific family dynamics, and the effects of the layering of anxieties, worries, fears, and hopes as their process of self-becoming unfolds. Before doing so, I first set out their cultural expectations of marriage to understand the values that shaped my interlocutors' everyday lives and decisions, and some reflections on the loneliness they experienced. I then explain their personal faith practices and the role of hope (addressed in this chapter) and *sabar* (taken up in Chapter Seven) in their lives.

Gendered Cultural Expectations of Marriage, Loneliness, and Personal Faith Practices

My interlocutors viewed marriage as a normative, essential part of life. Although some studies, such as that of Hassouneh-Phillips (2001a: 932-3), indicate that Muslim women may see marriage as part of their faith, the women in my study did not explicitly mention this religious aspect. However, my interlocutors held similar beliefs to those identified in studies of Muslim women in the United States and Egypt, who considered marriage to be integral to social life (Hassouneh-Phillips 2001b; Sherif 1999). It functions as a cultural script communicated through everyday interactions (Mahrotra 2016). They had been socialized to understand marriage as their primary role in life, and

believed that they needed to put in the 'hard work' to keep their marriages going (see Charsley 2005b: 95-6; Charsley 2007: 1121; and Mohammad 2015: 600, who suggests that, from a young age girls are socialized to adjust and compromise in their marital homes to settle in their marriages).

As the chapters will reveal, once married, my interlocuters did their best to endure and stay in the marriage. When their marriages broke down, they were faced with punitive immigration rulings or disownment. Returning home was also difficult due to the shame, stigma, and social precarity associated with divorce. In some cases, women were disowned by their families. As your will learn, marriage migration had removed my interlocutors from familiar social networks in which they grew up, leaving them dependent on their husbands and in-laws for companionship, support, and a sense of belonging. In their marital homes, they faced abuse that led to isolation. When relationships broke down, this isolation deepened. They hesitated to contact relatives out of fear of stigma. Moreover, disownment, lack of natal family nearby, language barriers, and restrictions on movement further increased their loneliness. For some, loneliness was not merely the absence of company but a pervasive feeling of disconnection from both their home culture and the society around them. They felt alone living in their single rooms and sensed that their struggles could not be fully shared, even with friends or family back home. Loneliness, anxiety, and fear led to mental health challenges for all my interlocutors.

When they explained their difficult times, hope and *sabar* were idioms regularly mentioned. Therefore, in this thesis, I draw attention to my interlocutors' practices of hope (this chapter) and practices of *sabar* (in Chapter Seven). These were gendered practices informed by their faith, rooted in a deep-seated emphasis on preserving marital status. Their hope and *sabar* practices appeared as a feminine capacity informed by their personal faith and intertwined with cultural practices of self-sacrifice and silent suffering (Mahmood 2005, 2015; Qureshi 2013). Yet, it is important to note that my interlocutors did not engage in any formal religious education or training; their practice was personal, shaped through their socialization, and intertwined with their daily routines and challenges.

During my fieldwork, I observed that my interlocutors adhered to the core tenets of Islam central to being a Muslim, such as professing belief in one God, praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and aspiring to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca at some point in their lives. Although Muslims are required to give *zakat* (donate a portion of their wealth), I did not observe this practice during my research. My interlocutors had a strong belief in one God – Allah – and diligently practised their daily prayers. When Shazia moved into her new accommodation, she asked me to use Google to find directions to the *Kaaba* (the holiest site in Islam), as Muslims are required to face it while praying (King 1985). During our time together, some of the women would step away to say their *namaz,* while others arranged to meet me after completing their prayers. They explained that they prayed to Allah to seek solutions to their challenges. They implored Him to resolve their struggles, crying to Him when their difficulties felt unbearable. Although they were sometimes angry with Him about their situations, they remained firm believers.

I observed my interlocutors diligently fasting during the month of Ramadan. Some did not meet me during the holy month because they spent their time reading the Quran and engaging in extra prayers. They explained that praying took up much of their time and that fasting was tiring. For

those I visited, I witnessed firsthand how they struggled to keep up the fast, especially when they were low in mood, worried about their issues, or exhausted. Some expressed relief when they were exempt from fasting owing to ill health or menstruation. Bilquis volunteered at a homeless charity because giving back was part of her faith. My interlocutors regularly expressed their gratitude through utterances such as '*shukhar*' (thanks be to Allah) and '*alhamdulillah*' (praise be to Allah).

In addition, all my interlocutors regularly reaffirmed their belief that Allah was the final decision-maker by uttering '*inshallah*' – God willing. They believed that they needed to act and do their best to get through life, but by invoking the term *inshallah*, they also acknowledged and accepted that what happens in life is ultimately in His hands. This belief is grounded in a vital element of Muslim faith: by placing complete trust in and reliance on Allah (*tawakkul*), the individual must balance their personal effort with their faith in Allah's wisdom, knowing that the outcome ultimately lies in His hands. This balance between human effort, faith, and trust in divine guidance is not a form of passive fatalism; it involves acting while trusting that Allah will determine what is best (Elliot 2016; Hamdy 2009; Menin 2015), as we will see when my interlocutors make difficult decisions, such as leaving their marriage.

A fundamental teaching in Islam is *sabar* – forbearance, which encompasses endurance, perseverance, and persistence while facing life's trials. Both hope (examined in this chapter) and *sabar* (examined in Chapter Seven) are seen as qualities that provide individuals with the strength to confront challenges, improve character, deepen one's connection with Allah, and hold the promise of rewards in the hereafter. These are valued virtues, enabling believers to remain steadfast in difficult times. Taken together, all forms of piety foster spiritual growth and guidance, moral conduct, harmony, inner peace, resilience, and patience, while also offering the hope of rewards in the afterlife. Yet, at times, especially when events did not unfold as they wished, my interlocutors struggled.

There may be points of overlap between *umeed* (hope) and *sabar* (forbearance). However, when faced with delays to their spousal visas while migrating to the United Kingdom for marriage, my interlocutors described experiences of 'hopeful waiting', a sense of anticipation and eagerness for an unknown but desired future. In contrast, forbearance (as discussed in Chapter Seven) was a capacity my interlocutors drew on when facing harsh, restrictive challenges alone in a foreign country and in making decisions to endure difficulties and while facing ethical dilemmas. Taken together, as the chapters will reveal, these women's precarious trajectories were shaped as much by their faith practices as by gendered expectations of marriage, punitive structures, interpersonal dynamics and social disconnection.

I now turn to this chapter's topic and the question of hope in UK-South Asian transnational marriages.

As explained in Chapter One, UK-South Asian transnational marriages have been an ongoing phenomenon since the 1950s (Ballard 1994). While the anthropological literature has mainly examined marriage arrangements, economic and migratory accounts, kinship obligations, and transnational marital experiences in the United Kingdom (Anwar 1979; Ballard 1994; Charsley 2005a; 2013; Gardner 2006; Mooney 2006; Shaw 2000), there has been comparatively little focus

on the pre-migratory experience of spouses forced to wait in their home countries owing to their husbands delaying their spousal visa applications. This chapter examines South Asian women's narratives of 'hopeful waiting' back home to illustrate how such women nurture hope as a way of dealing with the anxiety of long delays while their UK-based husbands apply for their spousal visas to the United Kingdom. I shall argue that, in the position of young brides, my interlocutors are forced to navigate the intertwining forces of their natal family's reputation and familial obligations, deliberate delays caused by their husbands in their spousal visa applications, and their aspirations for marriage and migration. In the face of the anxiety, doubts, fears, and worries they experience during these long waits, their mothers use hope (Miyazaki 2004; 2006) as a means to confront these challenges and keep their daughter's marriages intact. Despite their love, I argue that these mothers' behaviour is fuelled by their anxiety that the marriages must succeed. They seek to protect their family's honour, kinship relationships, and the social and economic benefits of transnational marriages. This situation points to kinship politics, wherein greater importance is attached to family honour and kin relationships than to the daughters' own interests.

In the following section, I will highlight the lack of focus on hope in previous studies on UK-South Asian marriages. I shall then set out my theoretical framework. I argue that, for my interlocutors, their hopes and desires reflected a particular 'take on the world' (Crapanzano 2003: 19), wherein marriage was important. My interlocutors experience a sense of 'hopeful waiting' fostered dialogically by their mothers through mother-daughter conversations. This points to the role of interlocution in hope and its culturally specific modes of practice (Mattingly 2010), revealing how, in the context of complex legal and familial dynamics, my interlocutors use hope (Miyazaki 2004; 2006) as a means to face their challenges and fulfil their desires. In addition, rather than acting in their daughters' interests, their mothers use hope to keep their daughters' marriages intact, uphold their family's honour, and ensure economic and social gains.

Next, I will present my case studies. Four of my interlocutors experienced delays with their spousal visa applications. For this chapter, I have decided to focus on three cases. In the opening section, I shall examine Irum's case. I shall also present Farah's and Saira's experiences to illustrate my abovementioned arguments and shed light on these women's journeys of self-becoming.

I now turn to the lack of scholarly attention to the question of hope in UK-South Asian transnational marriages.

Underexplored: The Role of Hope in UK-South Asian Marriage Migration

As Gardner (2015: 200) points out, scholarly studies on transnational marriage migration in the field of anthropology contain elements of melancholia and nostalgia, as well as considerable ingenuity and innovation. However, such studies lack detail when it comes to the hope that research participants speak of or how they foster or apply such feelings of hope. These studies make fleeting, cursory references to hope as a verb – that is, as something that people do. For example, there are single sentences alluding to parents' hope that mutual kin will provide reliable references when assessing the character and background of a potential match. There are also brief references to migrant South Asian women married to UK-South Asian men, who hope that their

husbands (now living with their white English partners) will return to them. Equally, references are made to parents who hope that a marriage to a woman from Pakistan will place their sons back on the right path, as well as to married women in abusive marriages who hope for better relationships and to migrant men's hopes of finding a good job (Charsley 2005b; 2013). Single sentences can also be found concerning British South Asian women who hope to find better partners in Pakistan thanks to their religious and moral standards and suggesting that such men will not wish to remit funds back home to their families (Charsley 2005a; 2006).

Reference is also made to those who hope that migrant men will not conceal flaws that are difficult to detect in a transnational context (Charsley 2013), as well as to fathers hoping to marry their sons to Sikh women in Punjab (Mand 2002), and Punjabi families hoping to marry their daughters abroad (Bélanger & Flynn 2018). There is a cursory mention of the hope experienced by migrant spouses who undertake wage labour with a view to sponsoring relatives (Mooney 2006). Divorce-focused literature also refers to the following: first marriages being about fulfilling parental hopes (Qureshi 2016: 254-61); migrant men with negative experiences of marrying a UK-born South Asian woman who now hope that a Pakistani bride will be more committed to marriage (Mirza 2016); women who hope that their husbands will change their behaviours over time (Andersson, Cockcroft, Ansari, Omer & Ansari 2010); and when parents in broken love or mixed marriages pursue arranged marriages for their children and hope for better outcomes (Mody 2020). In anthropological studies on UK-South Asian transnational marriages, however, scant attention is paid to how hope is fostered when it comes to delays in spousal visas and marriage migration.

In line with scholarly discussions in the South Asian context (see Aga 2016; Ballard 2008: 50; Hassouneh-Phillips 2001a; Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001; Lindholm 1982: 55-112; Shaw 2000: 137-94), for most of my interlocutors, marriage was central to their family and how its members positioned themselves within kinship and community systems. Women assented to marriages arranged based on their family's worldview and social context, questions of family honour and respect, economic stability, family alliances, and social norms and rules. As Gardner (2002; 2008: 485) and Charsley (2013) highlight, and as is mirrored by my case studies, transnational marriages are desirable for women's families because they are seen as a path to acquiring respect in the community, economic security, and, in turn, strong kinship relationships. In Irum's case, to uphold a sense of respect, her father refused to renege on his word after accepting Irum's marriage proposal. Notwithstanding the financial support he received, he maintained that the marriage proposal, from a wealthier cousin living abroad, was a good offer. Such socialization thus informs processes of self-becoming.

Next, I shall present the anthropological literature that deals with the question of hope, which I shall use as a framework to examine the sense of hope encountered in my case studies.

Anthropological Perspectives on Hope: A Useful Framework

It is important to note Crapanzano's assertion (2003), in his seminal contribution to the question of hope, that, from a theological perspective, hope figures in eschatological religions. Along with faith and charity, hope is also a principal virtue; it offers a sense of possibility, salvation, belief, and dependence on some other – God (Crapanzano 2003: 5-6). Although Crapanzano does not address

Islam, the faith of Islam follows similar lines, to which all my interlocutors adhere. In Islam, faith in Allah is the basis of hope. Hope in the Qur'an, the Islamic religious canon, is seen to take the form of patience combined with action to achieve one's goal, pointing to the notion that knowing one's goal and obstacles can help preserve hope (Shirvani 2018).

From a psychological perspective, Crapanzano (2003) argues that hope is intimately related to desire, which is effective. Because people act on it, desire presupposes human agency (when faced with deciding whether or not to act). Crapanzano (2003) suggests that whereas desire reveals a psychology, hope presupposes a metaphysics. He also draws our attention to the idea that, whether we decide to prioritize desire or hope, we must in any case recognize that what is hoped for or desired reflects a particular 'take on the world' (2003: 19). In my interlocutors' worldview, marriage was significant, as they had all been socialized and pressured to think about marriage in this way (see Hassouneh-Philips 2001a; 2001b). As their narratives uniformly reveal, timely and happy marriages were highly desirable for them and their families. This desire was compelling – it had the power to bring about action on their part while they also placed their belief in the finality of Allah's will (predestination) when it came to their marriages. Such a belief should not be seen as an immobilizing 'theological fatalism' (Elder 1966, cited in Elliot 2016: 489). Rather, this outlook is accompanied by personal action undertaken to achieve one's desires (see Elliot 2016; Hamdy 2009; Menin 2015), while remaining cognizant that what Allah wills will ultimately prevail.

As well as being present in most religious canons, hope is also found in political narratives (see Murakami's op-ed in the New York Times 2011, cited in Miyazaki 2017a: 1; and Obama's speech 2008, cited in Miyazaki 2017b: 172). Hope also plays a key role in the marketplace. One example of this is in a noodle shop window sign that states, 'No extra charge for customers hoping for large portions' (Genda 2017: 98). We are regularly told to be hopeful and never give up hope, and we quickly learn that it is good to have hope. We are told that we can sustain hope if we work hard and are encouraged to remain hopeful and not allow negative thoughts to weigh us down. Although such discourses may appear unidirectional, they also involve an interlocutory aspect because, in many cases, someone is dialogically encouraging the practice of hope. It is worth considering Mattingly's (2010) work here, because it elaborates on the interlocutory and discursive dimensions of hope, examining how these are fostered in culturally and contextually specific ways.

Mattingly (2010: 39) focuses on 'underground practices'– that is, the less visible tactics that shape action and possibility between patients, parents, and healthcare professionals. Mattingly argues that, for the families in her study, hope represented a stance toward a reality requiring careful cultivation since they were living with a child with a significant disability. Especially when this situation was coupled with poverty and racial stigma, this was grim work and a cause for despair. This example points to a paradox in the cultivation of hope (Mattingly 2010: 3-5). Mattingly argues that, even when the prognosis was grim, the families and clinicians faced with this paradox needed to maintain a hopeful attitude (this is in line with the work of Appadurai 2004, Crapanzano 2003, and Beatty 2005: 34), which placed a tremendous burden on patients, family, and caregivers. These ideas helped me to address the 'hopeful waiting' conundrum I encountered in many of the case studies examined here, particularly the role of these women's mothers, who continued to foster a sense of hope in their daughters throughout their marital challenges.

Mattingly (2010) also explores how, when it comes to caring practices, hope is used discursively by medical professionals, parents, patients, and the wider community. She argues that the specific context shapes the interlocutory dimensions and discursiveness of patient-clinician communications regarding hope. In her case studies, clinicians conveyed this sense of hope through conversations. Mattingly (2010: 5) goes on to argue that they needed to convey and regulate their patients' hope and help them find new reasons to be hopeful, even without the possibility of a medical cure. Her work thus points to a dialogical aspect in the practice of hope achieved through conversations carried out culturally and contextually (within the medical spaces) in specific ways. Her work underscores the fact that people encourage each other to hope through dialogue, fostering and practising such a feeling. Ethnographically, this supportive relationship between people and hope fostered through dialogue can be found in studies of medical spaces (Eliott & Olver 2002; 2007; Mattingly 2010; Soundy, Smith, Dawes, Pall & Gimbrere 2013). I shall draw on this dialogical nature of hope practices, arguing that my own case studies illuminate how conversations around fostering hope constitute dialogical events in transnational marriage experiences. My findings show how newly married women tackle the challenges they face by fostering a sense of hope through conversations with their mothers. Even though their mothers love their daughters, they are often motivated by an underlying desire to uphold honour and social and economic standing.

Finally, to elucidate how my interlocutors engage with hope, I draw on the work of Miyazaki (2006), who conceptualizes hope as a 'method'. Miyazaki (2006) describes how Japan's 1990 financial reforms initiated a radical reconceptualization of Japanese subjectivity towards the idea of a 'strong individual' who takes risks and assumes responsibilities, arguing that this serves as a counterpoint to the image of the traditional man devoted to his company's collective interests. In the case study examined, Miyazaki demonstrates that such neoliberal ideas encouraged one informant to hold out hope for early retirement, this sense of hope then becomes a method to lead him to 'reposition his knowledge' by gaining new expertise and skills that help him work towards achieving his new goals. Drawing on this idea of hope as a method, I shall show, first, how my interlocutors' 'hopeful waiting' was a way to tackle their pre-marriage migration challenges and second, how they repositioned their views around the hard 'marriage work' they needed to undertake to make their marriages work, which my interlocutors believed they could (see Charsley 2005a: 85; 2007: 1121; and Mohammad 2015: 600, where it is shown that, from a young age, girls are instructed that they will need to adjust and compromise in their marital homes to make their marriages work).

My interlocutors were all migrating spouses. In their situations of hopeful waiting, these women (like Irum in the above vignette) were positioned within transnational marriages where they needed to wait for their spousal visa application, which only their UK-based husband could make.[21] Ghassan Hage (2009b: 4, cited in Biner & Biner 2021: 788) asserts that, 'The analytical power of waiting derives from its capacity to highlight certain features of a social process'. I observed that, in their indeterminately long wait for husbands to apply for spousal visas, these women and their families experienced a power dynamic between those who could and those who could not apply

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[21] See https://www.gov.uk/uk-family-visa/provide-information (Accessed 18 May 2023).

for a spousal visa to migrate and commence their marital life (see Biner & Biner 2021 for an analysis on the effects of this experience of waiting in difficult migrant experiences). During this period of waiting, my interlocutors shifted between feelings of doubt, anxiety, and uncertainty (Bandak & Janeja 2018).

Using the ethical (re)positioning analytical approach, a closer analysis of the case-study narratives sheds light on women's process of self-becoming. It highlights that, as the women in my study navigated this unsettling period (Vigh 2009), their experience of 'hopeful waiting' was nurtured through conversations with their mothers. Although their mothers loved them, their support was rooted in a desire to protect their family's honour and reputation, economic ambitions, and gendered norms. The hope fostered by my interlocutors with their mothers, with whom they were very close, appeared to be a method to ensure they abided by a form of world-making (Ahmed 2010). This world-making was in keeping with their kinship systems, which require people to act according to particular wishes concerning marriage arrangements. In nurturing hope for a happy marriage, norms of family and marriage become redirected as social goods (Ahmed 2010: 2) to uphold kinship systems, honour, and politics. Hope consists of a set of 'evaluative attitudes' oriented toward the future. It shapes our connections with the world, ourselves, objects, and others, as well as the relationships forged between these elements. Moreover, it influences the meanings and values we create and assign to each of these elements (Moore 2011: 23).

As in Irum's case, although her husband showed no physical, emotional, or social interest in her, which she found odd, her mother encouraged her to maintain a sense of hope. This situation continued for 7 years. As Berlant (2011) suggests, it is not that being married is inherently 'cruel'; what is 'cruel' is that these women must continue with their complex, challenging marriages (encouraged by their loving mothers) without fully considering how this could impede their aims (Berlant 2011: 1). Irum herself waited 7 years, positioned as a married woman living with her natal family, with minimal contact with her husband. During this anxious pre-migratory period with her mother, she continued to hope that she would be able to put in the hard work and enjoy a 'good marriage' after migrating to the United Kingdom. As Berlant (2011: 2) argues, optimism can induce ideas about a certain kind of world, which a person sees as appropriate and which they pursue. I contend that, notwithstanding the love between these mothers and daughters (which Irum discussed), there appears to be a possible relationship of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) between my interlocutors and their families' attachment to marriage and the (un)realistic possibility of flourishing in such a situation, as I shall discuss below.

I now turn to two case studies. These relate to Farah, who waited 4 years for a visa, and Saira, who waited over a year, in a situation of 'hopeful waiting' within a complex dynamic involving their own family and their in-laws, while waiting hopefully for their UK-based husbands to apply for their spousal visas.

Hopeful Waiting by Transnational Brides: Farah and Saira

Three months into my fieldwork, I volunteered as an English teacher at a local women's centre to help enlist more women in the project. There, I met Farah. One day after class, I asked her if she

could introduce me to any newly arrived South Asian women, separated or divorced, and who might be interested in joining my research project. She looked around to check if anyone was listening inquisitively, and then whispered, 'I will join. I am separated, but I don't want anyone to know, so when I come here, I pretend I am happily married'. I could barely contain my shock. Calmly, I replied, 'Please don't worry; I will not say anything to anyone'. She invited me to her flat to continue our conversation. Farah lived in a small, cramped room in a run-down four-bedroom flat she shared with other women. She ushered me into her room and offered me biscuits, before leaving to make tea. Soon, a smiling Farah returned with two mugs of tea. She pulled off her head scarf, sat comfortably, cross-legged on her bed, and snuggled under a worn-out blanket adorned with large purple flowers.

Farah explained that her in-laws came to Bangladesh to find a match for their son. They met Farah's family through a friend and asked for her hand in marriage. Farah was under twenty at the time, with no higher education and limited English language skills. She described how respectfully and reassuringly her father-in-law spoke to her parents, promising to care for Farah as though she were his own daughter. Farah explained that her relative in the United Kingdom looked into the family's reputation and found nothing negative, except that her husband had previously been engaged but his fiancée had broken off the engagement. Farah's sister was happily married in Ireland, which made her parents feel more confident about sending another daughter to the United Kingdom. Being of marriageable age, Farah agreed, and her father accepted the proposal.

As I sipped my tea, from the corner of my eye, I could see Farah's body hunch over; when I looked up, I sensed that her mood had changed. The bubbly person had disappeared. In her place was a slumped figure sitting cross-armed, with a frowning expression, dull eyes, and her gaze downcast. A sense of sadness filled the air. In a broken voice, with tears brimming in her eyes, Farah said, 'A girl's *'naseeb'* (fate) is what it is. You were born in your father's home and hope your *naseeb* takes you somewhere good. You try your best in your marriage'. Wiping away her tears, Farah continued, 'Now look what has happened to me'. Farah was separated. She was living in the United Kingdom, far from her natal family, on monthly benefits of under £300 in a small room in a flat shared with strangers. I sat back down in my chair. I looked at Farah with empathy and undivided attention, wrapping my fingers around the hot mug of tea to keep them warm, and listened.

Farah explained, 'It all started on our wedding night'. With a downcast look and nervously twisting her scarf in her fingers, Farah explained that from the start, her husband did not care about her thoughts and opinions and was also very physically *'badtameez'* (unpleasant/disrespectful behaviour) with her. As a young under twenty-year-old with no experience with men, Farah felt very humiliated and hurt by her husband's aggressive tone, distasteful words, and forceful sexual behaviours. She did not know what was sexually normal and what was not. She felt anxious. When she explained this to her mother, her mother reassured her, saying that, hopefully, things would improve once they were living together. Farah sat in silence, avoiding eye contact with me. I wanted to know more, but Farah appeared to be feeling either shy or embarrassed about describing her sex life. I did not probe.

I remembered how unsure I had been when I was engaged at 18 and married at 19. At that young age, many issues felt complicated. Farah explained that she had hoped to migrate to the United

Kingdom after marriage, but her in-laws delayed her visa arrangements. They said that to apply for a spousal visa, her husband needed to first finish his degree and get a job, which they had not disclosed before. During that time, her husband visited her twice. In private, he was always rude and aggressive towards her. In public, he was quiet and kept to himself. In family settings, he was very antisocial and insisted on remaining close to her. Farah began to cry as she said, 'I was so young, I became perplexed and anxious by his aggressive, unkind and unsociable behaviour'. Farah explained that she found it very difficult to face her aunts' and cousins' repeated questions about her husband's antisocial attitudes. Farah said, 'I felt '*sharm*' (shame) and embarrassment, yet he was my husband; I wanted to be a good wife, and I hoped for a happy married life'. When Farah discussed her anxiety with her family, they decided to speak to her father-in-law to resolve the situation.

When Farah's father told her father-in-law about his son's behaviours, he comforted them and sought to assuage their anxieties. He reassured them that he would explain things to his son. Farah and her family felt hopeful that things would improve once Farah had migrated to the United Kingdom. Farah explained that she had no choice but to continue with her marriage for the sake of her family and her *izzat*. Farah hoped for a 'successful marriage' and was willing to work hard and tolerate her husband's behaviours. She nonetheless said that she sometimes experienced 'big fears and doubts' and felt hopeless. Farah explained that she discussed her anxious feelings with her mother at the time, who helped her to remain hopeful. Despondently, Farah said, 'What could I or my family do? I have a younger sister and brother, and my divorce would ruin their marriage prospects'. Although she could have chosen to give up on the marriage, Farah and her mother hoped that the marriage would work out once she was living with her husband. Farah decided it was best to migrate, live with her husband, become a part of his family, and try to adjust and make her marriage work. She truly hoped that, as her mother had discussed, things would improve once she was living with her husband. However, the boundaries between Farah's hopes, desires, and personal satisfaction appeared to be constantly shifting, based on a complex dynamic of attachments, relationships, and meaning making (Moore 2011: 23).

In Farah's case, the behaviours of the people around her sparked my curiosity. First, her father-in-law promised to ensure that his son would behave, and Farah's parents took him at his word. Although faults in families, brides, and grooms can remain hidden owing to the transnational nature of such marriage arrangements (Charsley 2013), in Farah's case her family observed the groom's behaviour for almost 4 years. Despite this, they encouraged their daughter to remain hopeful and together they agreed to proceed with the marriage. In the Bangladeshi context, the anthropological literature points, on the one hand, to a decline in close kin marriages as a result of men's spatial mobility (Gardner 1995; 2002) and, on the other, to the fact that Bangladeshi men are keen to marry abroad to achieve a more prosperous life (Gardner 2008). It also highlights the surplus of women of marriageable age in Bangladesh because of men frequently delaying marriage. There is also a belief that kin marriages produce sickly babies (Ahmed 1986). This could have played into Farah and her family's worries and desire to agree to what appeared to be a good marriage proposal from abroad. As Gardner (2015) points out, in Bangladesh, families seize the chance to make foreign connections through marriage.

Farah's fraught intimate relationship with her husband also captured my attention. A quantitative and qualitative study of almost 4000 women conducted in four districts of Bangladesh suggests that 'violence in the lives of married women begins on the first night… with sex against their will and various forms of violence throughout their married life' (Khan, Townsend & Pelto 2014: 204-5). Moreover, a study assessing attitudes towards gender equity norms among 653 Muslim women in Bangladesh in both urban and rural areas has highlighted the need for educational interventions. These interventions would improve young women's understanding of equitable gender norms and rights and provisions for income-generation to help change the conditions experienced by women in a society that has been male-dominated for generations (Sayem & Nury 2013). Another analysis based on qualitative data indicates that certain Bangladeshi women understand sexual decision-making in very traditional, strict ways. In that same study, the Bangladeshi men rejected the idea that women had the right to refuse sex or experience sexual pleasure. Instead, they viewed sex with their wives as a husband's right (Fahmida & Doneys 2013).

These studies shed light on local attitudes to gender and marriage, which could help us to understand why Farah and her family tolerated her husband's behaviour and why they turned to her father-in-law to try to resolve the situation. It also underscores the social and economic backdrop in which Farah's mother fostered a sense of hope in her daughter. I believe that this highlights the role that kinship systems and politics play in how mothers foster hope in their daughters (Ahmed 2010). This system is deeply rooted in specific cultural and historical settings (Mattingly 2010). It hinges on concerns about the economic and social benefits of marriage, the family's reputation, and respect, possibly infused with an unrealistic sense of optimism (Berlant 2011), at the expense of the bride's marital happiness.

I shall now turn to Saira's case.

I was introduced to Saira through her solicitor in early July 2019, a few months after I met Irum and Farah. Saira was living in a women's refuge at the time. She joined my research project to share her story and raise awareness about her experiences of a transnational arranged marriage. Saira explained that she was well-educated, employed, and from a middle-class Muslim family living in a large city in Southern India. When she approached her thirtieth birthday and was still unmarried, her family decided to register with a marriage bureau. They hoped to find a good *rishta*. Soon, her husband's family sent them his profile. When Saira's family realized that he was a divorcee whose marriage had lasted 3 months, they were not interested in the proposal. Although Saira's family did not respond, Saira's in-laws repeatedly sent messages and called, hoping they would reply. Saira explained, 'It was hard for my father to avoid the call and appear rude'. Finally, her father succumbed and answered their phone calls. During these calls, her in-laws blamed their son's ex-wife and her family, reiterating that the divorce had not been their son's fault. They pointed out that their son was well-educated; he held an engineering degree from a highly rated Indian college and a master's degree from a UK university, and he earned an excellent salary in the United Kingdom. In a regretful voice, Saira said, 'We felt everything else about the proposal was very good except the issue of the first divorce'.

After nearly 7 months, Saira's family yielded to her in-laws, who came to meet them bearing large baskets of fruit. Saira's mother-in-law portrayed her son as a victim and impressed upon Saira's

family how they had 'sadly got caught up in this mess'. At that point, Saira's mother suspected that the boy might be impotent. She questioned his family at length to identify the real reason for the divorce. During that meeting, everything about the *rishta* appeared very positive, and the desire for a good, timely marriage ultimately drove Saira's family to accept the in-laws' explanations. One essential concern for Saira's family was her age. The groom's education and the fact that he had a well-paid job in the United Kingdom were also key factors. Saira explained that in a *rishta,* women's families are incredibly mindful of a boy's education and income. Because Saira was swiftly passing marriageable age, her family accepted the proposal. Saira looked into my eyes and said regretfully, 'Now I feel stupid to say that good education and salary is a big tick box for eligibility'.

Between Saira's engagement in January and her marriage in March, the couple remained in regular contact over the phone. Over these 3 months, Saira's fiancé was very caring and loving, and Saira felt that her hopes for a perfect marriage had been realized and that she was marrying the 'ideal man'. Abruptly, Saira stopped talking, shot me an embarrassed, apologetic look, and then looked away. After a long silence, she said hesitantly that there were many embarrassing and 'filthy' details to her story. I calmly replied, 'It is OK'. Describing her wedding night, Saira said that sexual intercourse did not feel 'normal' to her. Saira paused and tilted her head. Looking into the distance, she pondered for a moment, and then said, 'I clearly remember feeling that my husband was anxious and nervous during intercourse. When he 'came', he looked very relieved that he had performed and proved himself'. Saira said the other oddity that night was a question that her husband asked her, with a 'villainous' expression. He said, 'You have married me with good intentions, but what if I hit you? What will you do?' Saira thought it was just a joke, and replied laughingly, 'I am not the kind of girl that if you hit me, I will stay quietly in a corner. I can take care of myself; I won't tolerate it'. Saira explained that she brushed off both of these incidents because she believed she had married a 'good' man. Saira's mother calmed her down, and her hopes remained intact. Nevertheless, she said that she never forgot the strange discomfort she had experienced on her wedding night.

Saira also described another incident that made her anxious and apprehensive. One morning, Saira heard her mother-in-law and husband in the washroom with the shower on. As it was Saira's room, she waited for them to come out, thinking, 'Who gives such a big son a shower – my mum loves my brothers, but she does not give them a shower. This is weird'. Soon, Saira's mother-in-law came out smiling and left the room. When Saira saw her husband showered, she asked, 'Did your mother shower you?' He replied, 'Yes, you are supposed to do this for me; you did not do it, so she did it'. Saira said she felt 'stunned'. She gave me an uncomfortable look and said, 'It was weird and confusing'. Saira explained that she spoke to her mother about the incident, who pacified her. She suggested that perhaps it was a one-off incident and hoped it meant nothing. Saira said, 'I ignored my niggling feelings of anxiety because my husband's romantic behaviours hypnotized me during our engagement'. Saira set these incidents aside and did not allow them to bother her.

A week later, her husband returned to the United Kingdom. Saira stayed behind with her in-laws. Although her cooking skills were sufficient, her mother-in-law complained to her husband that she could not cook. She insisted he would not 'survive' Saira's 'poor' cooking in the United Kingdom. Her mother-in-law told her husband that she needed to look after him and wanted to accompany Saira to the United Kingdom. Her husband hid these details from Saira. Instead, to

keep her hopes intact, Saira's husband reassured her that her spousal visa would arrive in 2 or 3 months. Over time, Saira developed a strong sense that her mother-in-law did not like her. She constantly complained about her without good reason. Sadly, this led to arguments between the married couple. Feeling fearful, Saira began to obey her mother-in-law unquestioningly. Saira explained that it did not matter to her what her mother-in-law did as long as she did not upset her marriage. Saira spoke to her mother, who advised her to maintain a steady relationship with her mother-in-law to avoid marital problems. Speaking in a low tone, Saira explained that she continued to hope for the happy marriage she had imagined.

As time passed, Saira realized that her in-laws wanted to come and live in the United Kingdom. Saira was apprehensive about them living with her and her husband because she hoped to make her marital relationship work without her difficult mother-in-law. Feeling anxious and unsure, Saira spoke to her mother, who encouraged her to remain hopeful because things would settle down once the couple were living together. However, Saira could not contain her anxiety, and she spoke to her husband about it. Unfortunately, Saira's husband relayed their conversation to his mother. Her mother-in-law blamed Saira angrily and said, 'Already your wife is rejecting us, how dare she'. Unfortunately, from that moment on, Saira noticed that her husband was regularly irritated during their calls. He began to instigate unnecessary fights between them, which would turn very nasty, and during which he would say derogatory things to Saira. In a frustrated voice, Saira explained that she realized that her husband shared everything about their relationship with his mother and then became more agitated and aggressive. Throughout this time, her mother continued to advise her to be patient and remain hopeful. Saira found that her hopefulness was beginning to wane.

Saira soon realized that whenever her husband was charming, it was because he wanted something from her, for instance when he asked her to role-play his mother during sexualized conversations, or when he asked for nude images of her in particular poses. Saira found his requests 'unusual'. She obliged because he was her husband; they were newly married but living apart, and he was missing her. Saira sent many compromising images on WhatsApp. Saira looked at me with tears in her eyes and muttered regretfully that her mother was extremely troubled when she heard about this. Her mother worried that the circulation of such images could damage Saira's reputation. Saira whispered, 'At that time, very stupidly, I did not realize what was going on, why he was being sweet but also fighting, and what his sexual behaviours meant.' Saira looked at me and, in a low repentant voice, said, 'Us girls hope and imagine our marriage is forever. We hope to make it a success and are willing to put in all our efforts, sometimes blindly, to make our marriage work'. I felt deeply troubled by Saira's disturbing accounts; as I listened, I had goosebumps, and a shiver ran down my back. Although Saira and her mother felt anxious about the situation, there appeared to be a relationship of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) between their attachment to her marriage and the realistic possibility of her flourishing within it.

One day, the UK visa office called Saira and informed her that her visa application had been submitted in the wrong category. They agreed to transfer the forms to the correct category but could give no guarantees about the outcome of her application. When Saira heard this, she panicked, and her hopes sank. Feeling extremely worried and hopeless, she began to suspect that her husband might not want her to go to the United Kingdom. She discussed this with her mother, who explained that Saira had no other option but to wait, and that hopefully everything would

work out after she had migrated to the United Kingdom. Finally, a year after her marriage, the whole family's visa processes commenced, and Saira travelled to the United Kingdom with her in-laws. After the fieldwork, Saira and I met regularly. During one meeting, Saira explained to me that her GP had referred her for therapy. Through this, she understood how close she had been to her mother growing up. At the same time, however, Saira also felt immense pressure from her parents to be well-educated. She explained that, despite struggling with stress and being diagnosed with poor mental health, her parents insisted that she retake exams to get into medical school, even though she found them too difficult. Similarly, because Saira was approaching 30 and still unmarried, her parents were keen to arrange her marriage. She described the constant gossip and judgement in her family, with her mother feeling anxious and pressured to prove that Saira was doing well and married to a good, eligible man. Reflecting on this, Saira looked at me with a look of resignation and said that while she now understands her mother's situation, she still feels hurt by those attitudes.

Next, I shall examine the family politics faced by my interlocutors.

'Hopeful Waiting' Within Kinship Politics

Through the 'ethical (re)positioning' analytical approach, I shall examine the behaviour of the grooms, in-laws, and parents in this section. In the final section, I shall then analyse Irum, Farah, and Saira's hopeful waiting.

Three transnationally arranged UK-South Asian marriages: The behaviour of grooms and in-laws

Irum, Farah, and Saira's marriages all took place between 2011 and 2014. Recent anthropological literature on UK-South Asian marriages argues that young people attempt to find compatible partners based on shared Islamic values (Rozario 2012). It also suggests that they take personal responsibility in their marriages (Abeyasekera 2016), resist parental authority (Rozario 2011), and assert a level of individual choice within arranged marriage practices (Pande 2014; 2016). However, although Saira and Farah married educated UK-based grooms, and Irum's UK husband was a mature 32-year-old man, they allowed their parents to take the lead in their marital arrangements.

By studying the groom's behaviours over time and space, in Irum's case we can see that her husband made no physical, emotional, or social connections with her. This situation continued until she fled the marriage. Farah's husband's abusive behaviour began on their wedding night. Then it continued over their 8 years of marriage until he threatened to kill Farah, at which point she fled the marital home. Although Saira's husband appeared charming and romantic before the marriage, his behaviour became 'odd' after they wedded, and his mother exerted a strong influence over him. After Saira migrated to the United Kingdom, he became physically abusive, often pinching, hitting, and sexually forcing himself upon her. Finally, Saira refused to succumb to his abuse, which angered him. He attempted to choke Saira, and she fled the marital home. I believe that there was something odd about the grooms' behaviour both throughout the transnational marriage arrangements and afterward.

In relation to the in-laws' behaviours: in Irum's case, her father-in-law never discouraged his son from following him around; instead, he allowed his newly married son to remain constantly by his side. Irum's in-laws (the husband was incapable of applying, as Irum later found out) also successfully evaded arranging Irum's UK visa for 7 years. Instead, they appeased her family with financial support, keeping the balance of power in their favour. When Irum arrived in the United Kingdom and began to question her husband's odd behaviours, her father-in-law was furious. He threatened to kill Irum if she dared to spread rumours about his son, declaring that there 'was nothing wrong with him'. Today, Irum is still fighting for a divorce. These behaviours suggest that their son's condition was considered a potential cause of shame. To save face and protect their family's honour, they arranged his marriage, kept his behaviour hidden, threatened to kill Irum if she questioned it, and remained uncooperative with the divorce process.

Farah's in-laws, on the other hand, swiftly initiated marriage arrangements to counteract any reputational damage caused by their son's broken engagement. After that, the in-laws delayed Farah's migration for 4 years on the grounds that their son was studying. As a student, he could not fulfil the financial requirements for a spousal visa application. Farah's father-in-law did not deny the groom's abusive behaviours. Instead, he assured Farah's family that his son would change. Once in the United Kingdom, Farah's husband's abuse continued. However, her in-laws refused to seek medical help for their son in case this led him to lose his job and income, which they needed to support the family. To keep his abuse at bay, they advised Farah on ways to evade his aggression. This suggests that they knew about their son's behaviour when they arranged his marriage. Similarly, in Saira's case, the in-laws pursued her family persistently because they desperately wanted to see their son married, possibly to mitigate the potential reputational damage caused by his first unsuccessful marriage. They lied about the reasons for their son's divorce; Saira later learned that he had also severely abused his first wife. Moreover, Saira's mother-in-law's fractious behaviour and indications of her unusual sexual and psychological hold over her son caused problems in the marital relationship. I would suggest that, in these cases, the parents wanted their sons to marry so that they could present them as 'married men' and save face in the community.

These cases differ from situations in which, to curb their son's unacceptable behaviour, such as drug or alcohol use or perceived illicit relationships, parents in the United Kingdom bring brides back home in the hope that their sons will settle down (Samad & Eade 2003: 84-5). They also differ from cases in which UK parents immediately arrange spousal visas to ensure that the couple are legally cohabiting (Charsley 2013). Instead, the opposite seems to be true in the cases studied here, where the in-laws seem to have wanted a 'wedded son' to signal to the community that their son was married and to maintain their family's respect. They also kept a hold over their sons for psychological and financial reasons. This behaviour by the in-laws creates a sense of discomfort and confusion for the bride and her family. This is further enforced by the economic, familial, and citizenship-based hierarchy in place, along with the United Kingdom's stringent immigration rules. This creates a relational power dynamic, which the in-laws use to their advantage.

Furthermore, as I shall discuss in the next section, my interlocutors' parents were positioned in kinship systems that afforded greater importance to family honour, social and economic benefits, and their other children's marriage prospects than to the interests of the daughter getting married.

Three transnationally arranged UK-South Asian marriages: Brides' parents' behaviours

Irum's parents provide the first example of such a dynamic. Irum's marriage was based on an arrangement between two fathers within one kinship. Honour was a vital concern, further complicated by an unequal power dynamic deriving from the groom's family's wealth and UK citizenship. Shaw (2001) argues that, like Irum's families, cousin marriages prioritize familial obligations over personal interests, serving to maintain kinship ties, social status, and bloodline purity. They also act as a migration strategy, preserving connections to ancestral homelands. Irum confirmed this dynamic one day while she and I were walking to the library to try and find some local English classes, and the conversation returned to her family. Irum explained that her older sister was married in the United Kingdom within their *biradari*. She lived in a joint family system and could not educate herself or work, which their father silently accepted. Irum muttered with a shrug, 'What can he say? He is poor, and so through our marriages, we get sacrificed for money and his *izzat*. In line with Ahmed (2010), Irum said that even her mother and grandmother had opted to prioritize upholding honour and receiving economic gains over ensuring her happiness.

In Farah's case, wedding a daughter of marriageable age to a suitable suitor was an important priority when it came to upholding the family's status. To them, a UK proposal for Farah appeared attractive and prestigious (see Gardner 2015, which shows that most Bangladeshis want transnational marriages). They were also eager to uphold their family's *izzat* to protect the marriage prospects of Farah's younger siblings. In fact, I observed that Farah never mentioned her separation publicly. Only after her younger sister was married did Farah publicly open up about her broken marriage. Saira also remained quiet about her marital breakdown to avoid gossip. Her parents also accepted the proposal to save face because Saira was swiftly passing marriageable age. The fact that the proposal was from a well-educated boy with a good salary also played a crucial role in their decision to accept a divorcee for their daughter.

Interestingly, Charsley's (2006; 2013) work shows that some UK-South Asian parents protect their daughters by delaying the consummation of the marriage until their non-UK-based husband migrates and the couple are legally cohabiting in the United Kingdom. Contrastingly, my interlocutors' parents did not consider protecting their daughter against immigration and marriage migration precarity. They allowed their daughters to consummate the marriage before her UK spousal visa had been confirmed. Furthermore, had she had fallen pregnant, their child could have been born back home and remained geographically separate from the father until migrating to the United Kingdom, a process that was under the in-laws' control. The significant difference between Charsley's work and my study is that, in my case, the parents and brides are from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. They viewed the UK-based groom's family as superior in both economic and social terms and in terms of citizenship status. Rather than protecting their daughters, these families were careful not to upset the in-laws and remained polite even when they felt that things were going badly.

In such circumstances, even if the mothers felt anxious about their daughters' situations, they persisted in fostering a sense of hope in them. They offered hopeful reassurances that things would improve once they were living with their husbands. The mothers promoted the idea that women were socialized to think that 'their marriage [would] settle once they cohabit'. The mothers' support

was grounded in a desire to maintain family honour, which itself informs the mothers' sense of hope. In Irum's case, family politics came to the fore when she ran away from her in-laws' home. After this, Irum's parents terminated all connections with her because, in their view, she had disgraced them. They insisted that she return to her in-laws, regardless of the consequences. Irum explained to me that the family's honour was deemed more important than her own happiness and security. To avoid stigma, gossip, and shame, Farah and Saira were both instructed to keep silent about their marital breakups. Mody (2020: 185) rightly characterizes kinship as both a space of care and a place where constraints, coercion, and choice interact and influence each other, shaping the dynamic of kinship relationships

I shall now turn to the brides' behaviours as they awaited their spousal visas, posing the question: what effect did the social position and behaviour of their natal family and in-laws have on my interlocutors, and what light does this shed on their use of hope as a means to navigate their anxieties and challenges?

Three transnationally arranged UK-South Asian marriages: The brides' behaviours

As these case studies demonstrate, my interlocutors all desired and hoped to build a successful marriage. These feelings were rooted in their socialization, in which marriage holds great significance. Their hope was grounded in their ideals (Crapanzano 2003; Mattingly 2010), as espoused by their families and *biradari*. In all three cases, however, from as early as their wedding night the women sensed that their husband's behaviour was odd and that their in-laws held troubling attitudes, which continued as they waited for their spousal visa. There was undoubtedly some ambivalence in their experience of hopeful waiting, which was marked by ebbs and flows. These women oscillated between periods of hope and times of anxiety, fear, and doubt. While waiting back home, they felt extremely doubtful about the challenges they faced. As they wrestled with these difficulties, they turned to their mothers, who calmed them and encouraged them to remain hopeful. Even if their daughters were unsure and felt anxious about their husbands' and in-laws' behaviours, their mothers continued to encourage them to maintain hope and to keep looking forward.

During their upbringing, my interlocutors' processes of self-becoming taught them to accept the responsibility of 'marriage work,' which involves adjusting to one's in-laws' everyday practices and ways. In their challenging circumstances, my interlocutors repositioned themselves (Miyazaki 2006) to undertake the hard work involved in making their marriages work, which they believed they could do. As Charsley (2005a: 389-90) points out, marriage plays a crucial role in shaping women's lives, with a significant emphasis placed on their ability to 'adjust' to increase the likelihood of the marriage succeeding. Despite their struggles and fears before their marriage migration, they decided to migrate to the United Kingdom: Irum insisted that her father persuade her in-laws to arrange her visa; Farah chose to remain in the marriage to preserve her family's respect and honour; and Saira travelled to the United Kingdom with her difficult mother-in-law. Although the opportunity to settle abroad often leads people to jump through hoops (Gardner 2015), I would suggest that my interlocutors' hope stemmed from their belief that they could make their marriages work by putting in the 'marriage work'.

Conclusion

UK-South Asian transnational marriages have remained an ongoing phenomenon since the 1950s. Anthropological studies have examined marriage arrangements, economic and migratory accounts, kinship obligations, and transnational marital experiences in the United Kingdom. However, little attention has been paid to the pre-migratory experience of spouses waiting in their home countries owing to their husbands delaying their spousal visa applications. Throughout the fieldwork, my interlocutors described their pre-migratory challenges to me. This included, for instance, husbands who misbehaved on their wedding night, did not answer calls, were rude and abusive, and exhibited unusual behaviours, and in-laws behaving in an untoward and fractious manner. My interlocutors also explained their reliance, as non-UK-based spouses, on their UK-based in-laws to apply for their spousal visa, with little control to expedite the process. A subtext of hopeful waiting underpinned all their accounts, which caught my attention.

To examine hope as a process of self-becoming in these case studies, I drew on the helpful framework provided by anthropological discourses concerning hope. I have argued that, for my interlocutors, their practice of hope was motivated by a faith-based impetus (Crapanzano 2003). Although this chapter has not been about faith, it is essential to note that, in Islam, the faith practised by my interlocutors, hope is viewed as patience *along with action to achieve one's goal* (emphasis added) (Shirvani 2018). Hand in hand, hope and desire also reflect a particular take on the world (Crapanzano 2003: 19). As South Asian women, marriage was important for my interlocutors. Moreover, their narratives also highlight their close relationships with their mothers and the regular conversations they had with them. This points to the role of interlocution in fostering hope. This situation revealed that they coped with the situation of hopeful waiting in culturally specific ways (Mattingly 2010), believing that their marriages would settle down once they were living with their husbands. As my interlocutors waited, hope became a means to face their challenges (Miyazaki 2004; 2006), wherein they acknowledged the need to work hard to make their marriages succeed.

Using this framework to examine my interlocutors' hopeful waiting 'revealed certain features of a social process' (Ghassan Hage 2009b: 4, cited in Biner & Biner 2021: 788). It sheds light on the modes of power held by those who can and cannot exercise influence, highlighting the position of UK-based in-laws within an economic and citizen-based hierarchy, which they exercise when delaying my interlocutors' spousal visa. This framework helped me to observe a back-and-forth process between doubt, anxiety, and uncertainty during this waiting period. This forms part of a complex dynamic (Bandak & Janeja 2018) wherein, on the one hand, my interlocutors wanted a 'good marriage' and were willing to put in the work needed to make their marriages successful while, on the other hand, they were forced to face their husbands' and in-laws' challenging behaviours. In this situation, despite their anxieties, my interlocutors fostered a sense of hope through mother-daughter conversations. While the mothers and daughters shared a loving relationship, the hope fostered by the mothers appears to be a method to ensure that the daughters abide by a form of world-making – to protect family honour, kinship relationships, and the social and economic benefits of transnational marriages. It befits their kinship systems, which demands that people act according to particular wishes (Ahmed 2010). In nurturing hope, the mothers' main

motive appears to be to keep their daughters hopeful and, in turn, their marriages intact – thus redirected them as a form of social good (Ahmed 2010: 2).

On the other hand, notwithstanding the love between these mothers and daughters, I argue that this attachment to something that can hold the promise of success suggests a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), which is potentially damaging. Even when the in-laws' behaviours were questionable, and the brides' families felt anxious, they still supported the marriage. It is not that being married is itself inherently 'cruel'; rather, it becomes 'cruel' because they become attached to it. As such, these women wished to continue their 'complex and challenging marriages' (encouraged by loving mothers), even if doing so could impede their personal aspirations (Berlant 2011: 1), which are not properly considered. In these contexts, the mothers' encouragement of hope in their daughters appears to be grounded in an acute concern with family honour and social and economic standing, and their other children's marriage prospects. I would therefore argue that this hope highlights kinship politics that place a greater emphasis on family honour and standing than on the daughter's own interests.

In this chapter, I have examined women's processes of self-becoming in the position of young brides at home. Women nurture 'hopeful waiting' in a web of familial duties and personal desires. They are caught in a perpetual maze of fears, doubts, and worries, along with a sense of anticipation and hope as they navigate the pressures of upholding their family reputation, fulfilling kinship obligations, and dealing with deliberate spousal visa delays by their UK-based husbands and in-laws. Worries, doubts, and hope intertwine as both practices and emotions while they navigate the ups and downs of the challenges faced during the interim period between their marriages being arranged and their migration to the United Kingdom.

I now turn to Chapter Three, which also explores my interlocutors' experiences and dynamics of self-becoming in the position of young women living with their natal families in their ancestral homelands, anticipating a 'good marriage'. In these cases, the women enter cousin marriages. I will examine key events in Shazia's, Irum's, and Razia's marital arrangements, such as forced marriages, restrictions on education, spousal visa delays, domestic abuse, disownment by their natal families, their husbands (also their first cousins) reporting them to legal authorities, and the breakdown of their transnational cousin marriages. These life events point to the inherent potential for such marriages to be carceral (Moran *et al.* 2018), shedding light on their effects on the processes of self-becoming.

CHAPTER THREE

CARCERALITY IN UK-SOUTH ASIAN COUSIN MARRIAGES

Shazia's Forced Marriage

I met Shazia through Irum (whom we encountered in Chapter Two) when she was just over 20 years of age. The two women became friends while living in the same women's refuge. The day I met Shazia, she was wearing light makeup, a head scarf, and a short beige winter jacket, and carrying a shoulder bag. Irum and I had planned to meet and just 'hang out'. Irum and Shazia walked hand in hand, chatting and joking together. Shazia gave nothing away about her life until we stopped for tea at a coffee shop. While Irum was in the bathroom, Shazia explained that she was a teenager when her grandmother and father forced her to marry her 42-year-old first cousin, Sameer, from the United Kingdom, who was also her sister's ex-husband. Sameer was her paternal aunt's son. She said she tried very hard to resist the marriage. Even her schoolteacher and older sister tried to stop her family, but they would not listen. Finally, Shazia surrendered to the forced marriage. Much to her disappointment, once she was betrothed, she was withdrawn from school and made to stay at home and care for her brother's children. After finalizing her sister's divorce, the family conducted Shazia's *nikah* ceremony in Pakistan.

Her husband arranged a set of false travel documents for her under a different name and date of birth. The legal minimum age for a UK spousal visa is 18. However, Shazia said she was under 18 when she boarded the plane alone, bound for the United Kingdom, to begin her married life. She said it felt like a bad dream. She explained that her aunt, cousins, and husband all mistreated her from the day she arrived. They made her cook and clean, and she was forced into domestic servitude by the extended family with whom she lived, especially her mother-in-law. She was not allowed to go out alone. She was sexually abused by her husband and given very little money for her personal use. She felt that no one cared about her. The situation she described points to domestic abuse as defined in English law.[22] After 5 years and 3 months, her husband handed her to the police on theft charges. Her marriage broke down, and she faced deportation back to Pakistan. Shazia said her parents insisted that she return to her marital home. When she did not return, they disowned her. In those early days, I was intrigued by Shazia's transnational cousin marriage arrangements, which presented several parallels with Irum's cousin marriage, and I set out to better understand this phenomenon. I followed the 'ethical (re)positioning' analytical approach, which enabled me to examine my interlocutors' cases and their processes of ethical self-becoming. In this chapter, I shall analyse how these women were positioned as young brides within

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[22] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/definition-of-domestic-violence-and-abuse-guide-for-local-areas. (Accessed 20 May 2024). The law states: 'Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence, or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: • psychological • physical • sexual • financial • emotional. Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour. Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.'

strict family dynamics of stern elders, powerful in-laws, and cousins, both economically and in terms of UK citizenship. I shall examine how they navigate this phase through submission and by agreeing to 'keep going', as well as how they stand up for themselves. I shall also examine the effects of the 'lamination' of their anxieties, worries, fears, and hopes, demonstrating that the process of self-becoming unfolds in a non-linear manner over time and space, through ethical dilemmas and reactionary processes.

Interrogating the Multiple Aspects of Consanguinity: Trust, Security, and Ambivalence

There is a longstanding disciplinary heritage of affinities between cousins within kinship studies, largely thanks to the work of scholars such as Levi-Strauss (1969), Needham (1958), and Homans & Schneider (1955), as well as the prevalence of the practice. These scholars emphasized how such unions foster reciprocity, alliance-building, and lineage solidarity. Globally, couples related to each other as second (or closer) cousins and their progeny account for an estimated 10.4% of the world's population (Bittles, Black & Govindaraju 2010: 1779). At 57%, Pakistan is amongst the highest quoted consanguinity rates in the literature, with 76% reported in certain Pakistani Army communities (Olubunmi, Neves, Badreldeen & Konje 2019: 88). Current debates on UK-South Asian transnational cousin marriages illustrate the preference for cousin marriages within the Pakistani context (Shaw 2001; 2006; 2014), which are considered safer (Charsley 2013). Such marriages are seen to strengthen consanguinity through affinity, and to provide trust, security, and support (Shaw 2006: 216), as well as strong emotional connections between close kin (Shaw & Charsley 2006: 407-8). Kinship and the associated notions of morality are also believed to reduce the daughter's mistreatment by her in-laws (Charsley 2013: 22), and that the migrating spouse will not abscond after gaining British citizenship (Gardner 2006: 385). This study offers a counterpoint to these arguments by highlighting the ambivalent nature of kinship ties, obligations, and practices. It illustrates 'the dark side of kinship' (Geschiere 1997; 2003; see also Gammeltoft 2018 and Obeid 2010) and demonstrates how the carceral (Moran *et al.* 2018) functions in transnational cousin marriages through the interpersonal actions of family members who also use the United Kingdom's stringent immigration rules to enforce intentionally detrimental carcerality within specific spaces (Moran *et al.* 2018).

In this chapter, I shall discuss cousin marriage dynamics that can be seen as inherently carceral. The case studies reveal that the families prioritize kinship and sibling bonds over my interlocutors' interests. They illuminate how such marital arrangements, which are entered into to promote the family's economic advancement and social mobility, lead to forced marriages that the daughters do not want. Certain brides then face travel delays owing to UK-based in-laws' failures to submit spousal visa applications on time (as examined in detail in Chapter Two). Owing to these delayed visa applications, these women remain in their natal homes for several years despite already being married. After their marriage migration, they are then confined to their home in the United Kingdom, where they are subjected to domestic abuse. Their in-laws (also their first cousins) use immigration rules to intimidate and control these young brides. They then hand them to the police, which leads to a marital breakdown and deportation threats as a result of UK immigration rules.

Simultaneously, the women's natal families also disown them. If deported back to South Asia, they would have had nowhere and no one to go to.

My interlocutors' experiences of transnational cousin marriages demonstrate spatial, temporal, structural, and interpersonal forms of carcerality (Moran *et al.* 2018). This situation is the result of family members' actions and the intertwining of various familial practices and legal structures. These forms of carcerality differ from studies that cast the carceral as something that is imposed on families by legal or social institutions (Brown & Bloom 2009 152-7; Godsoe 2023; Roberts 2022). In these cases, the state acts on women and families in carceral ways. In contrast, my interlocutors report carceral experiences brought about by the intertwining actions of their family members, both interpersonally and through their use of legal rules. Although my interlocutors in non-cousin marriages also faced several challenges, this chapter focuses on the experience of carcerality imposed by families through consanguineal and affinal relationships. It contributes to the debates on transnational cousin marriages by exposing the darker side of such marriages in UK-South Asian alliances.

In this chapter, I shall first critically appraise existing discourse on UK-South Asian transnational cousin marriage and the impact of the United Kingdom's 2012 immigration rules on my interlocutors' experiences of carcerality. Next, I shall briefly restate the central theoretical concept employed in this chapter through a short discussion of Moran *et al.*'s (2018) study of the carceral to understand how this phenomenon also occurs outside penal spaces. I shall argue that certain transnational cousin marriages are characterized by inherently carceral dynamics. To this end, I shall analyse a number of key issues in such marriages, as seen in the cases of Shazia, as described above, Irum, and Razia, both in their home countries and once they have migrated to the United Kingdom. These themes include forced marriages, educational restrictions, spousal visa delays while still living at home, domestic abuse, disownment by their natal family, and deportation threats faced after migrating to the United Kingdom.

I shall now turn to the key strands within the current discourse on South Asian cousin marriages in the United Kingdom.

Different Perspectives on UK-South Asian Cousin Marriages

UK-South Asian transnational family relationships between the United Kingdom and the homelands increased with the phenomenon of South Asian men migrating to Britain in the 1950s-60s (Anwar 1979; Ballard 1994). The scholarship on Pakistani communities in Pakistan and the United Kingdom shows that the concepts of *biradari* and *izzat* play a central role in certain Pakistani families (Ballard 1994; Charsley 2013; Shaw 2000; 2001). One predominant mechanism for maintaining kinship and honour is the arrangement of consanguineous transnational marriages between kin in the United Kingdom and Pakistan (Charsley 2013; Shaw 2000; Shaw & Charsley 2006). The abolishment of the Primary Purpose Rule in 1997 (which required proof that migration into the United Kingdom was not the primary purpose of a marriage) then saw an increase in marriage migration and an upsurge in men migrating to marry British South Asian women (Charsley 2005a: 382; Charsley & Benson 2012).

Around this time, drawing on case studies in Punjab, Pakistan, and Bristol, United Kingdom, Charsley (2013) studied British Pakistani families who chose to marry their daughters to Pakistani men. Charsley (2013) argues that an additional motivation for cousin marriages was the emotional aspects stemming from parents' concerns about their children's future happiness. Charsley (2005a: 385) argues that in cousin marriages, parents find trusted referees among their mutual kin who know both families and can provide a character assessment and information on the background of the potential match. In the event of marital problems, parents hoped that a network of shared kin in cousin marriages would help to avoid the marriage breaking down, support the couple, and prevent divorce (Charsley 2005a: 385). Charsley (2005a: 396) also argues that parents wanted to marry their children to spouses from back home to maintain their traditions, which they believed were upheld more strongly by people from their home countries.

However, Charsley (2005b) also highlights some potential disadvantages of transnational marriages. Examples include spouses marrying for economic mobility to obtain a UK passport, instances of cultural dissimilarities causing marital issues, and distance in transnational marriages concealing physical, behavioural, and other problems that are discovered only after the marriage has already taken place. Charsley (2005a) argues that such concerns outweigh the benefits associated with UK-South Asian transnational cousin marriages. Charsley (2005a: 386) posits that these risks lead people to 'cling to what is perceived to be the security provided by close kin marriage'. It is important to note that Charsley's (2013) study focuses on middle-class British families where British women marry men from South Asia. These families put considerable effort into finding the right match for their daughters. Through their focus on questions of kin and community in UK-South Asian cousin marriage arrangements, Shaw (2006) and Charsley (2013) provide invaluable insights into this process. Although my data was primarily collected from women who had migrated to the UK and experienced domestic abuse, my work and Charsley's do not map directly onto one another but nonetheless offer a useful counterpoint.

Charsley (2006) also notes that when British South Asian women marry men from back home, the UK immigration rules raise two primary risks. One is the possible rejection of the spousal visa application, which risks leaving the bride in the position of an 'immigration widow', to use Menski's term (2002), as cited in Charsley (2006:1170). The families studied mitigate such risks by performing the marriage ceremonies but delaying the couple's cohabitation until after the migrant spouse has migrated to the United Kingdom (Charsley 2005a). The second risk is that the UK authorities will deem the marriage bogus. A bogus marriage, Charsley (2006: 1170) explains, is one in which men from the homelands marry British South Asian women only to divorce them immediately after they have been granted British citizenship. Charsley (2005a) argues that British parents choose to arrange cousin marriages between trusted close relatives to mitigate these risks. However, it is important to note that in these cases, UK-based parents of British South Asian women take charge of the spousal visa application and, in turn, gain a degree of control over the migrating husband. Thanks to this power dynamic, they dictate the terms of the marriage and marital ceremonies. In contrast, my study addresses the experiences of brides who migrate to the United Kingdom, where their UK-based South Asian husbands are in a stronger economic position and control their spousal visa applications.

Another aspect addressed in studies of cousin marriages is the representation of genetic risks in UK media and policy interests. This issue is mainly examined through a medical lens. Cousin marriages are frequently essentialized and reduced to questions of congenital disabilities and genetic diseases in any children born of the union (Shaw 2006; Shaw & Raz 2014: 27). In response, Shaw & Charsley (2006: 406-7) argue that a '*rishta*' (which they define as a 'match', 'proposal', or 'connection') in a cousin marriage involves sentimental connections between siblings, between parents and children, and between prospective spouses. Such connections can fracture when such marriage proposals are refused. And in the event of a divorce, family rifts can arise owing to the dual ties of consanguinity and affinity. Nonetheless, they argue that a favourable cousin, or *rishta*, is preferred because it establishes a good match between people in terms of education, social standing, personality, and character (Shaw & Charsley 2006: 407). Similarly, in a study of Bradford families, Shaw (2014) argues that cousin marriages are important for British Pakistanis for economic, social, cultural, and emotional reasons, offering an opportunity for a 'better' life.

These studies have illustrated the positive aspects of cousin marriages. However, while they make a valuable contribution to our understanding of South Asian marriages, they overlook the marital experiences of women who migrate alone to the United Kingdom through cousin marriages. Insufficient attention is also paid to cases in which UK-based in-laws possess greater authority in terms of their economic and citizenship status, a power dynamic that enables them to influence their daughter-in-law's spousal visa application. The in-laws also provide financial assistance to the women's families in their home countries, further adding to the power imbalance. In addition, the studies considered here examine cases that predate the new punitive UK immigration rules enacted in 2012, which extended the probatory period for immigrant spouses on spousal visas from 2 to 5 years before they are eligible to settle in the United Kingdom. To address these gaps, I shall briefly revisit the UK immigration rules outlined in the introduction to demonstrate their impact on my interlocutors.

The 2012 UK Immigration Rules: Policy Shifts and Implications

Over the years, the United Kingdom has continually toughened its immigration rules to prevent sham marriages and ensure respect for private and family life (Charsley & Benson 2012: 10-11). However, Charsley & Benson (2012) argue that these new immigration laws are punitive. The tightening of the immigration laws in 2012 certainly had an adverse impact on my interlocutors. One stipulation is that migrant spouses must reside as a married couple in the United Kingdom on a continuous basis for 5 years and that they must submit a spousal visa renewal application after 33 months. Following this period, the migrant spouse can apply for ILR in the United Kingdom, but only after the 5-year probationary period. Notably, if the transnational marriage breaks down during the probationary period, the spousal visa is invalidated, and the migrant spouse must return to their country of origin. To examine my interlocutors' experiences from when they enter cousin transnational marriages until the marriage breaks down, I turned to the work of human geographers who apply the carceral outside the context of penal studies. As briefly mentioned in my introduction, I utilize the concept of the carceral as delineated by Moran *et al.* (2018), as described below. This conceptual framework offers a helpfully nuanced understanding of the spatial, temporal, structural, and interpersonal challenges faced in certain transnational

cousin marriages. By applying this analytical perspective, I aim to highlight the carceral dimensions of the lived experiences associated with these familial arrangements.

Carceral Conditions: Expanding the Analysis Beyond Prison and Penal Studies

In the field of anthropology, the notion of the carceral is predominantly associated with prison and penal studies. In Rhodes' (2001) review article 'Towards an Anthropology of Prisons', for instance, the prison remains the central reference point for this concept. In geography, however, 'the carceral turn' adopts a broader approach to the 'the carceral.' Moran *et al.* (2018: 676) offer an enriched understanding of the notion, positing that carceral practices and meanings can be identified in social relations and subjectivities. Consequently, the carceral is relative and dependent on the experiences of the person and their social context. They argue that, to understand the carceral, it is essential to consider the interplay of three carceral conditions experienced by the individual: detriment, intention, and spatiality (Moran *et al.* 2018: 679). Moran *et al.* argue that these are 'not qualifying conditions but rather considerations that bear on the nature and quality of carcerality' (2018: 677). I found their inclusion of the subjective dimension – that is, how the individual interprets and perceives their constrained position during carceral experiences – helpful in that it extends the notion beyond physical incarceration to include various social and psychological forms of confinement. This was helpful when analysing my interlocutors' lived experiences of constraints and provided a deeper understanding of their institutional, personal, and interpersonal challenges as well as their subjective responses to these experiences.

The first carceral condition, detriment, is understood as the lived experience of harm as perceived by those suffering it. Moran *et al.* (2018) focus on the experiences of a detriment rather than the intention behind it, focusing on the confiscation of an opportunity or potentiality that would otherwise have been available and the loss of which is experienced as detrimental. The second carceral condition, intention, refers to the agent who intends it and signals the decision-making of a calculative and controlling authority (Moran *et al.* 2018: 678). The agent is not necessarily a formal structure or organization that chooses to administer a punishment, nor does it need to be legal or ratified by the state. The agent could be a family structure that restricts the movement and agency of some of its members. Here, the authors consider the structures and motivation behind the practice, such as the formal expectation of behaviours (Moran *et al.* 2018: 678) in which harm is experienced. Detriment and intention also highlight the issue of temporal distance. Moran *et al.* (2018) argue that the detriment experienced by individuals, which may stem from an intention to harm, can have lasting effects over time and space. They suggest that, although the intent may have ceased to act directly on the individuals, its effects may persist in the long term.

The third carceral condition is spatiality. Moran *et al.* (2018) argue that if there is detriment and intention, there will necessarily be a related space(s). However, the nature of this space(s) and how the carceral is enabled and determined by it may differ radically. The space could be a detention centre, halfway house, domestic home, a former prison converted into a hotel, school, street, human body, or indeed any space or entity at any scale. They argue that rather than simply observing that the carceral is spatial, it is more instructive to consider how this might be the case (2018: 679). As such, they suggest considering the relationship between various (im)material

techniques and technologies that deliver intent, and the spatial relationship with them, through which detriment is experienced, contested, and resisted (2018: 679). Together, these three carceral conditions produce the experience of carcerality.

I found Moran *et al.*'s conceptualization of the carceral helpful thanks to its introduction of the subjective dimension, which broadens the carceral beyond physical incarceration to include various forms of social and psychological forms of confinement. This inclusion of individual lived experiences of constraints proved beneficial for my study because it allowed for a deeper understanding of how my interlocutors personally navigated the institutional, personal, and interpersonal challenges they faced and their subjective responses to these experiences. In the following case-study section, I shall examine events in my interlocutors' cousin marriages, both at home and in the United Kingdom, which they experienced as carceral.

Carceral Experiences in UK-South Asian Cousin Marriages: Irum, Shazia, and Razia

To examine women's journeys of self-becoming, I chose to focus on three case studies: Shazia (as described above), Irum, and Razia (as set out below). I shall first illustrate the forms of carcerality my interlocutors experienced at home, including forced marriages, the curtailment of their education, and delayed spousal visa applications, and demonstrate how their in-laws exerted power over them through economic indebtedness and the immigration hierarchy. Second, I shall explain events that occurred in the United Kingdom, which include domestic abuse and the use of the UK immigration rules to trigger the threat of their deportation back home.

Carceral Conditions: Events at Home

Forced marriages: Irum and Shazia

We already encountered Irum in Chapter Two. As explained there, when she was just a teenager, her father's UK-based first cousin phoned with a *rishta* for her to marry their 33-year-old son. The two fathers agreed on the marriage without consulting Irum. I have already described her shock upon learning of the marriage arrangements. Although Irum protested a great deal, from her father and grandmother's point of view, a *rishta* from a wealthier cousin living abroad was a good 'match' for Irum and the family. Her father refused to renege on the agreement because he had given his word, insisting that he could not go back on an agreement made with a member of his *biradari* because his *izzat* was at stake. Irum was horrified but had no choice but to submit to the marriage forced upon her.

Like Irum, Shazia was also a teenager when her family arranged her marriage to her first cousin, who was 42 years old at the time. Irum and Shazia both said that they vehemently resisted their marriages but to no avail. Irum explained that she had no one to support her. In Shazia's case, her schoolteacher and her older divorced sister tried to deter her parents but were not successful. It is possible, as one respondent in Samad & Eade (2003: 22) points out, that such parents feel it is

their duty to marry their children. They consider it an ethical act and a blessing. Similarly, as Mody (2020: 194) explains, from the parents' perspective, these decisions could be seen as intentional acts of care, despite being experienced as an act of force by some children. It is also helpful to refer to Mody (2015), who argues that the definition of 'forced' is itself problematic because marriages are grounded in various considerations and obligations, and the individuals getting married can experience a sense of psychological and moral pressure to abide by their parents' wishes.

Faced with the ethical dilemma of either protesting to save themselves or agreeing to the marriage to avoid their family's anger, both Irum and Shazia submitted to the marriages against their wishes. I would argue that Shazia's and Irum's experiences are examples of patriarchal family practices. It is crucial to acknowledge here, as Kandiyoti (1988: 274) asserts, that the term 'patriarchy' is frequently overused and undertheorized, often leading to an overly simplistic understanding of male dominance. Conversely, Hunnicutt (2009 554-5) contends that patriarchy retains its explanatory power if we account for 'varieties of patriarchy' and the various ways in which patriarchy manifests itself. According to this approach, we need to examine men's situatedness in the scheme of domination, especially relative to other men, such as my interlocutors' fathers in relation to their UK-based cousins. Hunnicutt stresses that patriarchy can persist even after structural gains in gender equality have been achieved, and that it can also be embedded in other forms of hierarchy and domination. Furthermore, this is not a simple formula of oppressor versus the oppressed. Instead, Hunnicutt (2009) argues that it is helpful to consider patriarchy as consisting of 'terrains of power' wherein men and women wield varying types and amounts of power. Although 'patriarchy' has been variously defined, it can be broadly understood as the social arrangements whereby men, as a group, are generally privileged and dominate women as a group (Hunnicutt 2009: 557). Patriarchy exists in a broad range of contexts, from small-scale entities such as family and kin groups to large institutions such as the police, military, organized religion, and the state (Ortner 2022: 307).

Shazia explained that her paternal grandmother was complicit in her marriage arrangements and exerted a significant influence over her father, who mostly lived with her and away from his wife and children. Irum's case shares similar points. Therefore, applying this nuanced understanding of patriarchy to my case studies, I argue that Shazia and Irum were positioned within family structures where both male and female members exercised their authority and where, ultimately, the decision-making was vested in fathers and paternal grandmothers. Their familial context presents the 'varieties of patriarchy' alluded to by Hunnicutt (2009: 545). One way to understand this context is through Hunnicutt's argument that any individual, male or female, straddles multiple positions in a landscape of domination. Citing Hill Collins (1991: 225), Hunnicutt argues that, in any given social context, 'an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed.' On the other hand, sons could be seen as women's most critical resource for ensuring security in old age (Kandiyoti 1988: 279). Moreover, the older generation, especially older women, exert significant social power by controlling their offspring's marriages (Shaw 2001: 325-6). In the cases studied here, grandmothers certainly appear to wield considerable power over their grandchildren's marital arrangements.

In Shazia's and Irum's cases, the hierarchical system is governed by age. According to this system, the young are seen as inferior to the old. Studies have demonstrated how younger women try to circumvent patriarchal controls (Aboulhassan & Brumley 2019; Momesso 2020; Salem & Yount 2019; Selamat & Endut 2020; Tønnessen 2010). However, in both Shazia's and Irum's cases, although they try to bargain, they do not achieve the returns they wish for. In the face of such an ethical dilemma, they ultimately concede to their elders' wishes and the cousin marriages forced upon them. Shazia also explained that her brothers threatened to kill her if she did not accept the marriage. She told me that she obeyed because the authority held by male kin members was frightening. I would contend that Shazia's and Irum's process of self-becoming was governed by their subjective experiences of the power wielded by elders in their families.

Education discontinued: Irum and Shazia

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Irum's *nikah* took place in Pakistan. Her husband and in-laws left a few days later, and Irum returned to her natal family to wait for her in-laws to arrange her UK spousal visa. When she spoke about this, her voice grew louder as she angrily told me that her in-laws had instructed her to stop studying, stay indoors, and focus on cooking and cleaning. Irum was annoyed by these instructions, but her father refused to challenge them. Similarly, as my initial description illustrates, after the marriage, Shazia's in-laws also stopped her education and restricted her to home-based activities. Much to the women's disappointment, their parents accepted and enforced this situation upon them. They could not change their elders' minds because their parents and grandparents were unwilling to stand against their kin members, that is, the women's in-laws. Often, families effectively restrain young women's behaviour by engaging them in an early marriage (Shaw 2001: 325-6). In their decisions, they prioritize kin and sibling relationships.

Scholarly works on gender norms within South Asia are helpful for understanding such behaviours. These studies suggest that the prevailing social system conditions the level of independence enjoyed by women (Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001: 707-8), which can vary enormously within Pakistan (Haeri 2002). On the one hand, an increase in women's participation in the workforce, the rise of youth culture and the use of technology, and amendments to and the enactment of new laws have given rise to gender shifts in South Asian families (Bhandari & Titzmann 2017). On the other hand, studies in certain rural settings point to strict *purdah* (literally meaning 'curtain') practices in the South Asian context (Jeffery 1979: 2-3), which denotes a segregation between genders. Such practices form part of a particular social system (Jeffery 1979: 19) legitimized by the cultural and religious values of the country concerned (Rozario 2006: 368). In such systems, there is a close link between women's seclusion, systems of arranged marriages, and the importance of controlling women's fertility (Jeffery 1979: 43). In a recent study conducted in rural Sind, Pakistan, Agha (2016: 4) underscores that women have little control over decision-making. Women are positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with their mobility restricted to the family home (Agha 2016: 2). Here, family is deemed more important than the individual, and both women and men obey rules and make sacrifices for the long-term interests of the family (Agha 2021: 247). A study on forced marriages in the United Kingdom within Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities also demonstrates that, in endogamous marriages, people still see the group as more important than the individual (Samad & Eade 2003: 108).

However, in Agha's (2016; 2021) study, consanguineous marriages benefit parents and brides in cultural and financial terms owing to the ease and comfort of being near close relatives (Agha 2021: 119). However, these marriages also involve costs and negative consequences for the young wives as they rule out other options for them, such as education (Agha 2016: 7). As in Irum's and Shazia's experiences, women are forced to surrender to the will of their parents (Agha 2021: 91). The prevalent view reported by Agha (2016: 7) was that female literacy would result in women becoming rebellious, gaining power, and challenging male authority.[23] Being very young, the women in Agha's (2016) study succumb to these pressures. Lacking education, they find that submission is the best option for survival (Agha 2016: 9). Agha (2016: 8) argues that restricting women to the house from childhood leaves them reliant on their parents for everything. Owing to such practices, women then become dependent on men for their security. In such cases, women fashion their identity in relation to their male family members (Agha 2016: 2). Similarly, studies indicate that a lack of education can place women at a disadvantage when facing abuse. For example, through a study of 1,775 married women from the Chitwan Valley Study in Nepal, Ghimire Axinn & Smith-Greenway (2015) demonstrate that education is associated with a lower likelihood of domestic abuse.

These studies underscore the gender rules that prevail in certain settings, which are similar to those of my interlocutors. The women examined in my study experienced the negative consequences of such rules. Like the women in Agha's (2016; 2021) studies, they did not wish to give up their education and stay indoors. An added negative consequence for my interlocutors, unlike the women in Agha's study, was that they were positioned in transnational cousin marriages and were forced to migrate to the United Kingdom. After migrating, their poor education and lack of English language and digital skills made it harder for them to integrate socially, and they therefore became extremely dependent on their in-laws. This situation negatively affected their ability to settle, seek help, and cope with life in the United Kingdom. They also had limited support from their natal families owing to their physical distance. They were emotionally distanced from their natal families as a result of the restricted phone access enforced by their in-laws. This context differs from the situation experienced by women who enter cousin marriages close to their natal family, for example, in Agha's (2016; 2021) study and Donnan's (1988: 126-8) study of marriages in Northern Pakistan. The restrictions on my interlocutors' education therefore had far-reaching negative consequences, which were further exacerbated by the transnational nature of their cousin marriages.

Next, I shall consider the power dynamics in kin relationships that arise owing to the economic hierarchies surrounding these marriages.

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[23] I can empathize with these perspectives, as my mother also refused to send me to a boarding school to gain a better education, even though the schools in my area were academically poor. My mother felt that a boarding education and experience would make me overly independent and, consequently, less marriageable. To this day, she still struggles to understand why pursuing my education is important to me and often insists that I should focus on caring for the family and fulfilling my religious duties.

The hierarchical status of UK-based in-laws: Irum and Shazia

In one conversation, Shazia explained that her husband consistently sent money to her brothers. She explained that while the amounts were small for him, these funds helped her family in Pakistan to build a solid home with electrical and plumbing systems and furnishings. Shazia explained that this gave her family a greater standing within their local community. In her case, her parents may have arranged for their younger daughter to marry the older daughter's 42-year-old ex-husband for monetary reasons. Similarly, as already mentioned, Irum explained her father's low economic status – he ran a roadside stall, from which he earned very little. Irum's in-laws also provided her father with financial assistance. Agha's (2021 92-4) study of cousin marriages also highlights the economic hardship faced by the families involved. In such cases, consanguineous marriages offer incentives for financial stability for both parties, as understood by the women involved. For example, cousin marriages enable women to stay close to their natal kin, which is something the women desire. Donnan's (1988: 126-8) study of Dhund in Northern Pakistan also underscores the role of economic considerations in the preference for marrying close relatives.

In contrast, in Shazia's and Irum's cases, both families were complicit in their cousin marriage arrangements, which appear to have been beneficial for the parents but not for the daughters. Furthermore, their parents did not seem to be concerned with the risks around successfully acquiring a spousal visa to the United Kingdom, which was a significant concern for the British families studied by Charsley (2006). In Charsley's (2006) study, as mentioned above, to prevent UK spousal visas being rejected, the women's parents employ a risk reduction strategy by delaying the couple's cohabitation until the husband has successfully migrated to the United Kingdom. In my study, the bride cohabits with her husband from the wedding night onwards, despite any guarantee that she will obtain the legal right to live with her husband under UK immigration rules. Shazia and Irum both said that their parents were more concerned about their finances and kinship relationships than their own happiness.

As explored in Chapter Two, in Irum's case, when she protested over her marriage, which the two fathers had arranged without her knowledge, her father said he would not go back on his word because he insisted that his *izzat* and his kin relationships were at stake. In cousin transnational marriages, economic and immigration hierarchies introduce further unequal power dynamics on account of the practice of sibling obligation and abidance to kinship bonds. As Samad & Eade (2003: 31-2) point out, their Bangladeshi and Pakistani interviewees also explained that close relatives expect to marry their children within the family. Failure to do can cause conflict and friction between parents and siblings. It is important to note that these obligations to kin relationships are further complicated by the fact that Irum's and Shazia's families are economically subordinate; they receive monetary support from their comparatively wealthier UK-based cousins. Despite creating an unequal relationship between the families, this grants the families back home increased respect within their local community, which is something they desire.

The UK-based cousins also gain a higher status within the immigrant community thanks to their newly acquired power to offer upward social mobility to those living back home. Equally, thanks to the successful migration of their family members, the families back home also gain respect within their local communities. I would therefore argue that in the cousin marriages studied here,

kin and sibling obligations are combined with economic and immigration hierarchies. These underlying forces become intertwined, creating a negative dynamic for the young women involved despite the benefits for the rest of the family.

Next, I shall consider the transnational context of cousin marriages and the impact that immigration rules can have on the nature and form of carcerality experienced. To illustrate this point, I shall turn to Razia's and Irum's experiences of delayed migration as a result of their in-laws' failure to apply for their spousal visas promptly.

Spousal visa application delays: Razia and Irum

I met Razia, a petite young Bangladeshi, through Farah (whom I introduced in Chapter Two). Razia spoke very little English. She always wore a headscarf and a long traditional dress. Both women had become friends after living in adjoining rooms in a multiple-occupancy flat provided by their local council. Once Razia joined my research project (I shall elaborate on how she joined in Chapter Four), she explained that her mother died when she was very young, and her father died when she was 12 years old. Razia grew up with her stepmother. When she was under twenty, her stepmother arranged for her to marry her first cousin – her father's brother's son. She was married in Bangladesh. Razia explained that she had to wait 3.5 years for her spousal visa because of delays caused by her husband, who remained unemployed, making it impossible to apply for a visa.[24] Her stepmother, a single woman within the kinship dynamic with no male support, had no other choice than to remain patient. Razia also had no choice but to endure the 3.5-year wait. Similarly, in Irum's case, her in-laws applied for her UK spousal visa only after a great deal of gentle coaxing and a 7-year wait.

In a transnational marriage, only UK-based spouse and their family can initiate a spousal visa application. The non-UK-based spouse must wait for their husband to apply for their spousal visa. For Razia and Irum, this rule meant that, on the one hand, they were both subjected to immigration rules that made them dependent on their in-laws for their spousal visas. In Irum's case, her in-laws delayed this intentionally, and in Razia's case, the delays were attributable to her husband being unemployed. On the other hand, both women explained that owing to the dynamics of cousin marriages, their parents were unwilling to upset the in-laws and, by extension, the broader kin relationships by being forceful about their daughter's spousal visa application. Owing to the combination of immigration rules and the need to maintain kin relationships and family honour inherent in cousin marriage customs, my interlocutors were stuck at home. They had no choice but to wait, bear several years of stress and fear, which cast doubt on the viability of their transnational marriage, and face the ensuing gossip.

I shall now describe my interlocutors' experiences within their cousin marriages after migrating to the United Kingdom.

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[24] To make a spousal visa application, the UK immigration rules require the UK spouse to prove an annual income of £18,600; see https://www.gov.uk/uk-family-visa/proof-income. This has recently increased to £39K; see: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06724/ (Accessed 20 June 2024).

Carceral Conditions: Events in the United Kingdom

Domestic abuse: Irum

Irum explained that she observed her husband's unusual behaviours and lack of marital affection while she was in the United Kingdom. He was unemployed and, for the most part, followed his father around everywhere. He had peculiar eating habits and regularly entered into arguments with people. Irum explained that she found life in her in-laws' house terrifying. She had little connection with her husband, and his habits disturbed her. Irum spoke very little English. She was unaware of the rules surrounding her spousal visa, and her in-laws exerted complete control over her. They made her cook and clean and, unlike their employed, British-born daughter-in-law, she was rarely allowed out alone. She explained that when she described her situation to her parents, they said she should never leave her in-laws' house because it would disrupt the family relationships and bring shame and stigma upon them. Her parents threatened that she could never call them again if she left. Irum said she felt trapped. She confided in her sister-in-law (her husband's brother's wife) about her husband and asked how to seek medical support for his issues. Irum had hoped for understanding and assistance. Instead, her sister-in-law reported their conversation to the father-in-law, who was infuriated by Irum's suggestions. He blamed Irum entirely for her marital shortcomings. He then put a knife to her neck and threatened to kill her if she dared to spread rumours about his son, asserting that 'there was nothing wrong with him'. Irum said *'Mai bohot dar gai; kya ye log muje mar dein ge?'* ('I was terrified; would these people kill me?').

Irum explained that a few days later, when she was at home, with only her sister-in-law upstairs in her bedroom, she faced an ethical dilemma: whether to stay and endure the abuse and life with a husband with psychological issues or leave and save her life. Still afraid, she reacted 'in the moment' and, without any planning, fled from the house with just her handbag and passport. She was unaware of what the consequences of her actions would be. It is useful to consider Anitha's (2008) study here, which argues that migrant spouses who flee abusive relationships often do not know what the consequences for their immigration status will be, as this applied to Irum and my other interlocutors. Irum managed to get to the police and gave them a complete account of her experiences through an interpreter. When Irum contacted her parents, they insisted she return to her in-laws to uphold their honour and avoid shame and stigma for her family. Irum said that when she refused, they stopped talking to her and told her never to contact them again. Her natal family disowned her.[25]

The breakdown of her transnational marriage meant that under UK immigration rules, as explained earlier, Irum now faced deportation. However, if she returned to Pakistan, she could not go to her family home or seek help from UK-based relatives because of the interconnection of consanguinity and affinity. Irum explained that she found herself all alone and felt very scared. I believe that Irum was caught in various forms of carcerality owing to the interlinking of UK immigration rules, her ostracization by her natal family, and the lack of community support

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[25] During my fieldwork, Irum often considered calling her parents to see if they would take her back, but she never acted on this. However, after I completed my fieldwork, Irum explained that her mother had fallen seriously ill, which prompted her to reach out and reconnect with her family. Although they were still unhappy with her, she visited her mother, who was in hospital.

because of being in a cousin marriage and the powerful dynamic of family honour through consanguinity and affinity that this implied. She was moved to a women's refuge, where she explained (as also detailed in her medical reports) that she suffered from many mental health issues, including self-harm (I shall provide more details on this in Chapter Seven).

Next, I shall use Razia's and Shazia's cases to show how carcerality can be the intended outcome of family actions, proving detrimental for my interlocutors.

Marital breakdown, encounters with authorities, and deportation threats: Razia and Shazia

One day, as Farah and I were sitting in her room, chatting over a cup of tea, Razia came in with a bag full of documents. She wanted my help with understanding the tenancy agreement for the space she occupied in a multiple-occupancy flat. As I looked through her papers, I came across a letter addressed to Razia from the UK legal authorities requesting her deportation back home because her husband had written to them requesting that his wife's spousal visa be terminated because their marriage had broken down. He accused Razia of marrying him to gain access to the United Kingdom. When I expressed my sadness about the letter, Razia said she had been devastated when she received it. Razia explained that although she felt her husband suffered from mental health issues, which had led to problems in her marriage, she had not wanted her marriage to break down. Razia knew that she could not return home because her stepmother could not support her financially. Razia also did not want to return owing to the shame and stigma attached to being divorced. Her stepmother advised her to contact Mina, her stepmother's sister. Mina took Razia to her home. In the face of her ethical dilemma – either to stay in the United Kingdom and face punitive immigration rules or return where she was unwanted – Razia decided to stay and fight for her legal rights. Her aunt helped her find a legal aid solicitor to fight for the right to remain in the United Kingdom but later cheated her of her money and belongings (I shall elaborate on this in Chapter Four).

As Anitha (2008) explains in her study of migrant women in the United Kingdom facing domestic abuse and immigration rules, state laws further weigh the power imbalances within marriage against women. In Razia's case, deportation threats owing to the United Kingdom's punitive immigration rules when a transnational marriage breaks down become a means for her in-laws to control her movements and place of residence. These rules also mean that her husband can get rid of her whenever he wants because he understands them and knows how to use them to his benefit. This points to Razia's position within a cousin marriage where her kin members, as her affinal family, use the United Kingdom's punitive immigration rules to position her within a carceral intertwining of familial practices and legal institutions to her detriment, using her legal vulnerability against her.

I shall now turn to Shazia's case to illustrate how two to three consecutive adverse life events create a compounding, layering effect – a 'lamination' (Holland & Leander 2004) of repeated layers of adverse experiences – that produces carcerality, whose effects endure over time and space.

Shazia's family forced her to marry her older sister's abusive ex-husband. Shazia explained that although her elders had reassured her that she would not face the same consequences as her sister, her aunt, mother-in-law, husband, and cousins all mistreated her. She was obliged to cook and clean every day, was not permitted to eat meals with the rest of the family and was not allowed out alone. Her parents claimed that her in-laws were very kind because they shared their wealth (money they regularly received from her husband) with them and insisted that Shazia was the one creating the problems in her marriage. After almost 4.5 years, Shazia felt that she could no longer tolerate the situation but had nowhere else to go. She told me that her mother said that even if her husband was not a good man, as Shazia claimed, she nonetheless had to stay in her husband's home because then at least people would think she had not done anything wrong. Shazia's family could not bear the shame of a second daughter's divorce. During one conversation, Shazia said, 'I don't understand why my husband gave money to my brothers.' In response to this, Irum, who was also with us, said, 'he gave money to prove you were the bad one, and he was the kind-hearted person, and he could carry on mistreating you without facing any consequences.'

Shazia explained that she lived with her in-laws for 5 years and 3 months before her husband handed her to the police. He told them that she had stolen from him and threatened to kill him. The police took her away for questioning. She said she was terrified and did not know what the future would hold for her. Shazia left her in-laws' home without any documents or belongings and never returned (I shall provide more details on this in Chapter Seven). However, like Irum, Shazia could not return to Pakistan as her parents had disowned her. Faced with this challenging ethical dilemma, Shazia reported her abuse to the police with the help of a neighbour. They moved her to a women's refuge, where she, like Irum, suffered with poor mental health.

As Irum's and Shazia's cases demonstrate, their journeys of self-becoming involve a 'lamination' (Holland & Leander 2004) of multiple challenging life experiences and ethical dilemmas, during which they alternately abide, submit, and seek to stand up for themselves. This process begins with forced marriages and includes domestic abuse in the marital home. Their parents force them to remain in abusive marriages to uphold the family's honour, and they suffer experiences that include being handed to the police, marital breakdown, deportation threats, and mental health challenges, including loneliness after they are disowned by their family. For my interlocutors, their experiences of carcerality endure long after these immediate events have passed (as I shall discuss in Chapter Four).

Conclusion

The three cases examined in this chapter have included elements of forced marriage, domestic abuse, ostracization, deportation threats, loneliness, and poor mental health. These cases present a stark contrast to the widely held anthropological understandings of UK-South Asian transnational cousin marriages as 'favoured' (Shaw 2001; 2006; 2014), safe (Charsley 2013), and a means of strengthening consanguinity with affinity (Shaw 2006: 216). According to these discourses, cousin marriages grant the marrying families trust, security, and support (Shaw 2006: 216), with suitable matches chosen based on strong emotional kinship bonds (Shaw & Charsley 2006: 407-8), kinship morality, and family pressure. Such arrangements are believed to prevent the

daughter's mistreatment by her husband or in-laws (Charsley 2013: 22), as well as to arguably reduce the chances of the migrating spouse absconding upon receiving British citizenship (Gardner 2006: 385). In such discourses, cousin marriages based on kinship bonds of trust play an important role in reducing the risks of transnational marriages (Charsley 2007: 1120-1; Gardner 2006: 385). However, these studies relate to a period when UK immigration rules were less stringent, and after the United Kingdom's Primary Purpose Rule was lifted in the late 1990s. They also concern UK-based interlocutors and focus primarily on the experiences of British women marrying men from back home and the experiences of men who migrate to the United Kingdom for marriage.

By contrast, I approached the cases studied here through the 'ethical (re)positioning' approach, with a view to examining the women's (re)positions during this period, how they navigate challenging events, and their emotional 'laminations'. Moreover, my study was conducted in the context of the more stringent 2012 immigration laws. These rules introduced a new 5-year probatory period, requiring transnationally marrying couples to remain married for a far longer period than the previous 2-year probatory period to avoid deportations in the event of marital breakdowns. This lengthy probatory period can lead to an increased risk of deportation for immigrant spouses who experience domestic abuse, marital breakdown, and being handed to UK authorities by their spouses. To understand my interlocutors' challenging experiences in their cousin marriages from a spatial, temporal, structural, and interpersonal perspective, and in a migratory context, I drew on Moran *et al.*'s (2018) definition of the carceral. In this study, the authors argue that the carceral encompasses a person's subjective experience of three key conditions: intention, detriment, and spatiality. Here, the focus is more on the subjective experience of detriment rather than the intention behind it. Moran *et al.* (2018: 677) emphasize the lived experiences associated with the confiscation of opportunity or potentiality, the loss of which is experienced as detrimental. This approach has proven helpful as it includes subjective elements, framing this experience as an individual's perception of constrained potential. The carceral is therefore expanded beyond penal confinement to include social and psychological constraints, allowing for a better understanding of how women experience their institutional, personal, and interpersonal challenges.

Through the application of this analytical approach and the perspective of ethical (re)positioning, I argue that certain UK-South Asian cousin marriages bear an intrinsic potential for carcerality. Carcerality is the result of intertwining familial practices and legal structures. Within transnational cousin marriages, kinship obligations, honour, and economic and immigration hierarchies lead to parents forcing their daughters to marry UK-based cousins. Because of the fear of disrupting hierarchical kin relationships, these women's parents are not in a position to force in-laws to apply for their daughters' spousal visas in a prompt manner. As their parents also submit to the curtailment of their education, these women find themselves migrating at a very young age with little education and poor English language skills. Once in the United Kingdom, they experience domestic abuse in their marital homes at the hands of their cousins. After some time, their husbands hand them to the UK authorities on false accusations, which leads to marital breakdown and triggers threats of deportation back home. The women are also disowned by their natal families. In cases in which the UK Home Office chooses to deport the women, they have no one

and nowhere to return to. Moreover, if they do return, they face marginalizing, restrictive, and oppressive environments (Chowdhury 2009; Niaz 2004).

In this chapter, I have sought to illustrate that, for some women, their processes of self-becoming in the position of young brides at home commenced with forced marriages. We have witnessed women caught in an ethical dilemma, between protesting for what they want and submitting to their families' expectations to shield themselves from their anger. Their prospects are compromised by their parents' decisions to pause their education and restrict their movements, which they have no choice but to accept. While navigating these harsh rules in the face of adversity, they nonetheless remain attentive to any possibility or change in circumstance that might allow them to stand up for themselves. They described urging their parents to pressure their in-laws to apply for their spousal visas (as in Irum's case), soliciting help from others, such as a schoolteacher and elder sister (as in Shazia's case), and desperately urging their natal families to change their minds (in all cases). In the United Kingdom, they are subjected to domestic abuse. Faced with yet another ethical dilemma – either to stay and endure the abuse or leave and save their lives – Irum and Shazia leave their marriages, even though their future is unknown. I have proposed that a lamination effect can be seen here, because they undergo several emotional and physical challenges, including abuse and poor mental health, but nonetheless show great strength in making decisions against their family's wishes. Therefore, these women's process of self-becoming is a journey of compliance, abidance, resilience, existential challenges, and poor mental health – a non-linear journey across various (re)positions.

In Chapters Two and Three, we have seen how, back home, these women occupy the position of young women awaiting marriage. They then find themselves (re)positioned as brides waiting to migrate to the United Kingdom. After arriving in the United Kingdom, they are then (re)positioned as wives in abusive marital relationships. In the next chapter, I shall focus on the next phase of my interlocutors' lives – the period leading to their being granted ILR in the United Kingdom. I shall adopt the 'ethical (re)positioning' approach to examine their experiences of self-becoming and shed light on the emotional, social, and economic precarity they repeatedly endure during consecutive life events in their transnational marriages. Introducing the concept of 'carceral escapes' as an analytical approach, I shall also describe the recurring carceral dynamics that migrant brides face in their broken transnational marriages.

CHAPTER FOUR

'CARCERAL ESCAPES' – DOMESTIC ABUSE, PUNITIVE IMMIGRATION RULES, AND DESTITUTION

Although I have already introduced Irum, the account below sets out my first encounter with her and my initial observations concerning her disposition, providing insights into how the challenges she faced shaped her self-becoming from the outset. These initial observations were central to my conceptualization of the notion of 'carceral escapes', which I developed to critically examine my interlocutors' challenging journeys of self-becoming.

Irum: First Encounter

As mentioned previously, in my first week of fieldwork, Aisha offered to introduce me to Irum, who was living with her after receiving her ILR, as a potential interlocutor for my research.[26] On a cold December morning, as I entered their apartment, I was welcomed by the aroma of freshly cooked '*roti*' (flat bread). The warmth of the room was a cosy contrast to the cold outside. Over a delicious breakfast, Aisha explained that she and Irum came from the same community back home. After learning of the challenging experiences Irum had faced, she invited Irum to stay with her. Aisha offered Irum free housing, food, friendship, and guidance to help her settle into life in the United Kingdom. Aisha said that she did not want Irum to suffer the same hardships she had experienced after fleeing her abusive marriage in the United Kingdom. Aisha was especially mindful of the fact that Irum came from a rural setting. She was very young and had limited English language and digital skills and little understanding of life in the United Kingdom or the bureaucracy it entailed. As we sat chatting, Irum entered the dining area – she was quiet and withdrawn, and her gaze was downcast. Her shyness was palpable, and a sadness seemed to linger around her. Although Irum sat with us, she did not eat or participate in our conversation. She mainly looked down. I offered Irum some food, but she refused, saying she was not hungry. When I tried to ask questions to include her in our conversation, she mainly replied, '*Pata nahī*' ('I don't know'). I sensed a dullness around her, which left me with a feeling of heaviness and confusion that I could not shake.

Gammeltoft (2018: 590) has explained that, in Vietnam, women's low mood can arise from a domestic atmosphere of family pressures, hostility, and partner violence. She argues that for such women, their mood is affected not only by their own state of mind but also by the affective tone of their domestic space, explaining that women's mental health is inseparable from the structural vulnerabilities of the kin group with whom they live. In contrast, Irum appeared to be in a safe living situation, with support to help rebuild her life. Moreover, while I was volunteering at the refugee centre, I observed that asylum seekers were always overjoyed and relieved when they were granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom. Irum's low mood, on the other hand, persisted

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[26] As explained in a previous chapter, I met Aisha while volunteering at a national refugee centre. Aisha was the first woman I contacted when I began my fieldwork. She agreed to help with my research and introduced me to Irum.

during my early fieldwork days. In light of this, I was determined to uncover the causes of Irum's lingering low mood. It is important to note my intention in this chapter is not to analyse mood (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011), but rather to consider mood as part of a larger ethnographic context and investigate the events that contributed to Irum's state of mind at this point.

At first glance, the reasons for Irum's low mood were not immediately apparent; Irum had the legal right to remain in the United Kingdom, safe accommodation at no cost, and Aisha's guidance to help her settle into life in the United Kingdom. I suspected that, in addition to her experiences relating to her forced marriage, the delays with her spousal visa, as described in Chapter Two, and her experience of domestic abuse during her marriage in the United Kingdom (as discussed in Chapter Three), there must be other events affecting Irum's mood. This brought to light the carceral (Moran *et al.* 2018) aspects of Irum's experiences, as well as those of my other interlocutors, which will be the central focus of this chapter.

In Chapters Two and Three, I demonstrated that women in transnational marriages faced several challenges both at home and in the United Kingdom. However, why – having been granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom and escaped the abusive situation – did Irum appear to be in a low mood? To answer this question, I shall once again call upon the 'ethical (re)positioning' concept to analyse women's experiences when (re)positioned after separation or divorce and as legal UK residents, the life events they were forced to navigate, and the 'lamination' of different emotions experienced during their journeys of self-becoming. During these journeys, my interlocutors' challenges did not abate. Instead, as I shall seek to demonstrate in the following ethnographic sections, they continued to face further challenges in and across complex life events, without their natal family nearby.

In anthropology and migration studies, debates on UK-South Asian marriage migration have shed light on the experiences of migrant spouses within kinship and community networks that operate as a collective (Anwar 1979; Ballard 1994; 2008; Charley 2013; Gardner 2015; Qureshi 2016; Shaw 2001; Webner 2013). They also highlight the impact of the increased controls in UK immigration rules and policing on migrants' everyday experiences (Anitha 2008; 2011; Mirza 2016; 2017; Raj & Silverman 2002; Voolma 2018; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2018). However, the repeated challenges that certain South Asian women who migrate alone to the United Kingdom face across multiple life events in broken transnational marriages remain under-explored.

In the cases studied here, women's challenging experiences recurred unabatingly over time and space and across successive life events with carceral characteristics. This led me to develop the concept of 'carceral escapes' (as detailed below), in which I use the broader definition of the carceral provided by geographers Moran *et al.* (2018) as set out in Chapter Three. Having described these in detail in Chapter Three, I shall revisit them briefly here. In my juxtaposition of the notions of the carceral and escape, I follow Ortner (2016: 65), who advocates for the value of examining notions that, though at variance with each other, remain in active interaction. Ortner (2016) argues that this allows us to analyse how these contrasting ideas shape, limit, and transform each other. With the concept of 'carceral escapes', I understand that an escape can have varied outcomes, from reincarceration at one end to positive outcomes at the other.

I believe that 'carceral escapes' provides a helpful framework to analyse the period of repeated challenges my interlocutors face across different life events. It provides a useful framework through which to understand how, in such contexts, an apparent 'escape' can in fact involve subjection to new carceral regimes and how the carceral can seep into the fabric of escapes, with the repercussions of the preceding carceral context continuing into the next. The 'carceral escapes' model offers a useful way to study the indeterminate outcomes of successive longitudinal carcerality in transnational marriages, with some immigrant spouses experiencing domestic abuse, deportation threats, destitution, and homelessness.

In the following sections, I shall begin by outlining some relevant scholarly debates on women's experiences in transnational marriages, which have predominantly centred on women belonging to kin and community networks. I shall also explore debates that examine women's experiences after fleeing domestic abuse and facing immigration controls, that is, within a specific life event. I believe that this study contributes to an under-explored area in these discussions.

Next, I shall revisit the carceral conditions described by Moran *et al.* (2018) and define the concept of 'carceral escapes'. I then outline how I applied this concept to five case studies based on Irum's, Lubna's, Saira's, Razia's, and Shazia's experiences, before setting out some concluding points.

Scholarly Debates: Women's Experiences in Transnational Marriages and Immigration-Related Controls

As discussed in the introduction, scholarly works on the ongoing phenomenon of transnational marriage migration from South Asia to the United Kingdom (Ballard 1994) predominantly emphasize the interconnecting dynamic of kinship and community. For example, such studies illustrate how, within marriages, most families expect women to make 'adjustments' (see Charsley 2005a: 389-90), be adaptable and tolerant, and make sacrifices for the sake of the family (Mooney 2006). They also underscore women's role in building enduring kin and community relationships through formal and informal social activities (see Shaw 1994: 46-9; 2000: 227-58 for a Pakistani example, and Gardner 2006 for a Bangladeshi example). Such studies have also focused on women's role in reinstating South Asian kinships and community (Pakistani community: Shaw 1994: 40-1, 2000; Sikh community: Ballard 1994: 96; Bangladeshi community: Gardner & Shukar 1994: 15). Other research focuses on wives who stay back in their homeland to promote the larger good and for the family's benefit (Gardner 2006: 380), as well as those who follow the rules of their elders (Shaw 2000: 94) within their marriages.

Other scholarly works have described the settlement issues experienced by the second wave of migrant daughters-in-law who undertook domestic responsibilities and carried the family's honour (Charsley 2005a; 2006; 2007; Shaw & Charsley 2006; Mooney 2006). These studies demonstrate that women were expected to be 'simple,' 'domestically inclined', homely', and with an 'adjusting nature' (see Charsley 2005a; Mooney 2006). They also shed light on the risks faced by women marrying British husbands who had English partners, drug and alcohol habits, or a disability, which impeded their employability (Samad & Eade, 2003). Studies have also examined cases of British women marrying men from their homeland to remain close to their natal families (Charley 2005a;

Charsley & Liversage 2013; Mohammad 2015). Werbner's (2013) studies describe the experiences of women who move to their ancestral homeland in marriage and may not share the same lifeworld and kinship practices, which take years to assimilate.

More recent research focus examines the rise in marital breakdown in British South Asian communities (Qureshi 2016; Qureshi, Charsley & Shaw 2014), pointing to shifts among the next generation, who are unwilling to engage in marital tolerance, adjustment, and compromise. In such cases, young people have their family's support in divorcing and remarrying and have more of a say when it comes to selecting their future spouse. In this body of research, women's experiences are primarily analysed in terms of their position within marriage, the family, and the community, demonstrating that South Asian kinship systems operate as a collective but tend to overlook those outside these normative experiences. There has been little research on South Asian women who arrive alone with no natal family presence in the United Kingdom, experience domestic abuse, transnational marriage breakdown, deportation threats and destitution, and live on benefits as single women in the United Kingdom.

A separate body of scholarly works critically examines the experience of migrants who escape domestic abuse and must then confront restrictive immigration controls. Emphasizing the interactions of these individuals with legal systems and related social actors, such studies interrogate a range of experiences, including kinship, law, and immigration rules. For example, Voolma (2018) and Anitha (2010) studied how tightening immigration controls in the United Kingdom compromised the safety and welfare of women and children with no recourse to public funds, while Bhuyan (2008) studied how some women in the United States must identify as 'battered immigrants' to be granted legal rights, as well as the effects of such denotations on these women. Femi Ajao (2018) demonstrated that some Nigerian women in the United Kingdom are likely to endure abuse because of their fear of deportation and destitution; Mirza (2016; 2017) examined mother-in-law abuse and economic destitution after transnational marriage breakdowns; Yuval-Davis *et al.* (2018) reflect on the adverse effects of the negative transnational marriage discourse surrounding sham marriages; Gebreyesus, Sultan, Ghebrezghiabher, Tol, Winch, Davidovitch & Surkan (2018) consider how limited government support can lead to high risks of violence and exploitation, primarily when women are forced to undertake informal work to survive; and Raj and Silverman (2002) offer a cross-cultural review of the violence faced by immigrant women as a result of the immigration rules of their host countries. However, insufficient attention is paid in these studies to the experiences preceding and following these life events and the interrelating effects over temporal space.

Next, I shall briefly revisit Moran *et al.*'s understanding of carceral experiences through three key carceral conditions.

Conceptualizing the Carceral Through Carceral Conditions

As suggested above, the cases studied here presented carceral characteristics that recurred over time and space and across successive life events. I therefore returned to the human geographers Moran *et al.* (2018), who, as I explained in Chapter Three, argue that carceral features can be found

outside the penal system. I drew on their conceptualization of the carceral as an interplay of three conditions. The first condition is detriment, which refers to the lived experiences of harm and the confiscation of opportunity or potentiality that would otherwise be available, which is subjectively experienced as detrimental. The second condition is intention, which focuses more on the individual experience of detriment than on the intention of the controlling authorities, paying attention to how the effects may persist in the long term. Finally, the third carceral condition is spatiality, that is, the spaces to which detrimental intentions relate. Together, these three carceral conditions produce the subjective experience of carcerality.

Moran *et al.*'s (2018) understanding of the carceral is helpful as it introduces a subjective dimension to carceral experiences, describing individuals' interpretation and perception of their restricted potential as the basis of carceral experiences. This conceptualization broadens the carceral beyond physical incarceration to include various forms of social and psychological confinements. Applying the broader definition of carceral to the concept of 'carceral escapes' allowed me to extend the analytical gaze and pinpoint elements of the carceral repeating in my interlocutors' complex lives. This understanding enabled me to observe how carceral conditions operate in experiences such as forced marriages, domestic abuse, deportation, and domestic servitude and how people experience the carceral in and across temporalities spanning multiple geopolitical, familial, social, economic, and legal spaces. I shall now address the understanding of the carceral in current scholarship, before proceeding to set out how my study builds on and contributes to this body of work.

Scholarship on the Concept of Continued Carcerality Outside Penal Studies

In her study of the everyday carcerality experienced by Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic, and Refugee (BAMER) people in the United Kingdom, with a focus on their escape from domestic abuse and search for asylum, Cassidy (2019) extends the notion of the carceral into the everyday, suggesting that this creates a 'continuum of unfreedom'. She explains their experiences of being subjected to punitive immigration policies and control by everyday actors, such as agents, sales assistants, and landlords in the United Kingdom. Cassidy (2019) argues that, when leaving one violent situation of control, women expect to find new freedoms. Instead, when applying for legal rights, they find themselves subject to new processes of control that echo the carcerality they have left behind. Hamlin & Speer (2018) suggest that geographers adopt Foucault's (1977) metaphor of the carceral continuum when considering the enactment of the carceral so as not to depoliticize their analysis of carcerality and take into account the structural factors involved in such experiences. Although this approach emphasizes the carceral elements of an individual's experiences within political and institutional structures, it overlooks the carceral as experienced through social relations within personal spaces. This aspect is more clearly articulated by the carceral conditions described by Moran *et al.* (2018)

Gill, Conlon, Moran & Burridge (2018), on the other hand, developed the concept of carceral 'circuitry', which prioritizes the connections and circuits of people, objects, and practices that circulate through, between, and around carceral spaces in different ways. The central characteristic of this concept is its focus on the connection within and beyond carceral institutions and the circulation and flows through, around, and between them (2018: 197). Meanwhile, Doughty (2020)

developed the theory of 'carceral repairs' to understand how sizeable national energy projects can generate and reproduce forms of captivity and entrapment during the restructuring efforts following a disastrous incident.

'Carceral Escapes': Broadening the Scholarship on Continued Carcerality

The 'carceral escapes' framework adds to this scholarship and differs from the approaches outlined above in a number of key ways. First, the concept of 'carceral escapes' examines the recurring structural, personal, and interpersonal nature of carceral experiences. It examines how the carceral can recur over consecutive life events and across time and geographies, as well as how it is spatially enforced by institutions and people, with enduring effects. It also considers how the carceral appears in different ways, specific to the context in question, and is subjectively experienced. Second, 'carceral escapes' examines how people experience the effects of one form of carcerality seeping into the next. It is important to note that these effects are experienced subjectively, depending on the person's history, memories of past trauma, the triggers they create in the present, and how a person perceives the challenges they face. Third, it explores how the carceral seeps into the escape fabric, whereby an escape from one context extends into another manifestation of the carceral in the next. Fourth, it recognizes the indeterminate outcomes of each carceral escape. Filling a gap in current scholarship, the notion of 'carceral escapes' thus focuses on the carceral dynamic of successive longitudinal carcerality in transnational marriages across time and space.

It is important to note that some years after I left the field, my interlocutors say they are now better established in the United Kingdom from a legal, economical, and social perspective. Nonetheless, it is vital to consider my interlocutors' subjective experience of this dynamic of successive longitudinal carcerality over a challenging period. This highlights the individual's vulnerabilities, the laminating (Holland & Leander, 2004) effect of various forms of carcerality, its combined consequences, and the knock-on effects for recovery and the ability to live to one's best potential. Such an approach sheds light on these women's hopes, despair, courage, and forbearance as they navigate multiple carceral escapes, both as emotions and practices. Although the relationship between domestic abuse and mental health has been underscored in scholarly research (Dillon, Hussain, Loxton & Rahman 2013; Trevillion Oram, Feder & Howard 2012), the effect of existential vulnerabilities in a transnational context and the 'lamination' of past experiences and repeated carcerality highlighted by the concept of 'carceral escapes' could help better understand behaviours that might appear unusual at first, as in Irum's case.

I shall now illustrate what this concept reveals about my interlocutors' experience of repeated carcerality, from the period of their marriages to their lives as single women in the United Kingdom. First, I shall interrogate their carceral experiences within their natal and in-laws' homes. Next, I shall draw on the experiences of Shazia, Irum, Bilquis, and Lubna to illustrate the isolation, loneliness, and destitution these women experience after escaping situations of domestic abuse. In this difficult state, they are forced to deal with the United Kingdom's stringent immigration rules and face deportation threats, which are experienced as a form of entrapment and immobilization. After that, I shall focus on Irum's, Farah's, and Razia's cases to investigate these women's lives immediately after they are granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom. I shall examine how

these women's vulnerabilities shape their past and present circumstances and mark this phase of life. I shall also describe their experiences of betrayal, exploitation, and domestic servitude at the hands of individuals they trusted and on whom they depended because they had no one else to turn to in this period.

'Carceral Escapes': The Carcerality Inherent in Escapes From, Into, and Across Life Events

Life back home and after transnational marriage to the United Kingdom: Carcerality through forced marriages and domestic abuse

As I have described in Chapters Two and Three, my interlocutors faced forced marriages and delays in their marriage migration, both in their natal homes and in the United Kingdom. My interlocutors then all subsequently encountered difficult marital experiences, including death threats and physical, sexual, economic, and psychological abuse, which continued for several years. Some fled their marriages (Irum, Farah, Fatima, Lubna, Saira, and Aisha), while in some cases the women's husbands handed them to the police on false charges (Shazia, Bilquis, and Razia). Their experiences were unlike those of Qureshi's (2016: 84) interlocutors, who described negative marital experiences in terms of overly 'controlling' in-laws and husbands, captured by the term *rok-tok,* which Qureshi (2016) describes as the experience of being prevented from doing something. My interlocutors' descriptions of their experiences pointed to coercive control and physical, economic, and psychological abuse by in-laws and husbands (see Mirza 2017, who explains mother-in-law abuse). They also had little access to phones and were not permitted to go out alone. The UK Government categorizes these actions as domestic abuse.[27] In the South Asian context, experiences of abuse occur across multiple relationships, such as coercive control in the form of 'direct involvement' and 'indirect involvement' by mothers-in-law (Mirza 2017: 401-6).[28]

The women studied here also experienced abuse from their natal families, who insisted that they remain in their abusive marital homes for the sake of upholding the family's honour and kin relationships. When the women refused, their natal families responded by disowning them. As transnational brides in broken marriages, they faced threats of deportation and legal battles for the right to remain in the United Kingdom. Deportation was a fearful prospect for them since, if they did return, not only would they face stigma, shame, and economic precarity, but those who had been disowned by their families would have nowhere to go. Qureshi (2016: 132) discusses how families pressure women to remain in their marriage. In her study, some women choose to separate but not take the final step of getting divorced, so as to conceal their marital breakdown from their community owing to the reputational concerns associated with divorce. In the cases studied here, however, the women fled their marriages because their lives were in danger, or their husbands handed them over to UK authorities. In turn, some women's natal families pressured them to return to their marital homes, and when they refused, fearing for their lives, their families disowned them.

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[27] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/section/1/enacted (Accessed 15 July 2024).
[28] For a US study, see Wasim (2014); for an Indian study, see Gangoli & Rew (2011).

It is essential to note the precarity surrounding marital breakdown because of the varied support offered by natal families. For example, Jeffery (2001: 13-4) demonstrates that some parents refrain from intervening in their daughter's marital problems, while in the cases studied by Grover (2011), women could not fully rely upon parental support, particularly in the case of love marriages. In a more recent UK study, Qureshi (2016: 104-5) reports that her cases showed varied degrees of parental support. However, Qureshi found that the possibility of coming and going between conjugal and natal homes made it easier for women to access natal support, especially in cases where the husbands had migrated in marriage from their homelands (see also Vatuk 1971: 300, who shows the extent of parental support available to women when their residence is in close geographical proximity). It is crucial to note that even though, in the cases studied here, some families were empathic and supportive of their daughters, these women were not able to visit their natal homes freely, nor did they have access to hands-on support. Their families lived in their homelands, leaving them isolated in the United Kingdom.

Although scholarship points to how and why women opt out of or avoid marriage (see edited works by Davidson & Hannaford 2023), my interlocutors all repeatedly told me that they did not want their marriages to break down (see Gardner's 2022 discussion on Bangladeshi women's attempts to avoid marital breakdown). As mentioned by Farah and Fatima, for example, they all attempted to make their marriages work to uphold their family's honour and respect (Tonsing 2016: 26). I understood their perspectives because I, like them, never wanted my marriage to break down, regardless of the hard work required to sustain it. As mentioned by Irum, Shazia, and Lubna, others felt parental pressure to remain married to maintain respect and obligation (Ahmed, Reavey & Majumdar 2009). Bilquis and Razia did not want to leave their marriages because they knew that they would not be welcome back home. Bilquis's family threatened to kill her if she returned home, and Razia's stepmother discouraged her from returning because of the shame it would entail and her poor financial situation.

After they fled or were handed to the authorities by their husbands, these women's marriages nonetheless broke down irretrievably. Their visas were subsequently terminated, triggering the threat of deportation to their home countries. As Anthia (2008) contends in her study of migrant women in the United Kingdom facing domestic abuse and immigration rules, state laws further weigh the power imbalances within marriage against women. For the women in my study, punitive immigration rules become carceral methods of control and abuse by their UK-based in-laws and spouses and, in some cases, also by their natal families.

In their marital homes, as immigrants, all my interlocutors were entirely dependent on their in-laws to help them settle into life in the United Kingdom.[29] However, they received little support with integrating. When they fled, they had a poor understanding of life in the United Kingdom. This became a barrier to facing life alone in the United Kingdom. Their precarity was compounded by their poor language and digital skills and lack of knowledge of the relevant legal or cultural systems. Throughout their abusive experiences, the women felt scared and intimidated. They were rarely permitted to go out alone, which led to them being excluded from opportunities to participate in UK life. It is helpful to refer to Cassidy (2019) here, who argues that being kept apart

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[29] See Charsley's (2005a; 2005b) study of immigrant spouses' experiences of settling into the United Kingdom.

is a form of carcerality. My interlocutors faced forced marriages and intentional physical, physiological, and economic abuse, as well as instances of threatening, controlling, and coercive behaviour from their husbands and in-laws. They experienced the carceral conditions (Moran *et al.* 2018) of being intentionally forced into marriage (in some cases) and abused in their marital homes, which they experienced as detrimental. Forced and abusive relationships resulted in women losing opportunities that would otherwise have been available to them, a loss they experienced as detrimental (Moran *et al.* 2018).

I shall now consider my interlocutors' experiences after facing immigration controls. Although all of the women faced difficult, long-drawn immigration battles, I shall focus on the cases of Shazia, Irum, Bilquis, and Lubna, beginning with Shazia's experiences.

Life after transnational marriage breakdown: The carcerality of punitive immigration controls and the feeling of confinement

One day, as we were walking to the GP practice, Shazia explained that after she reported her marital abuse to the police, they moved her to a hotel for a few nights, before subsequently moving her to a hostel and then onto a women's refuge. She explained that the refuge provided her with a lawyer, who applied for a DDV concession[30] and for rights to remain in the United Kingdom. With very little evidence beyond her statement, Shazia was extremely worried about her case. To obtain supportive evidence, Shazia asked her neighbour Ifat, who had initially encouraged her to leave her husband, to be a witness. Ifat refused to testify in court, however, fearing retaliation from her neighbours and Shazia's in-laws. This left Shazia in a precarious position, as she knew that her case was fragile without any supporting evidence. After much persuasion from Shazia's solicitors, along with careful consideration and expressing the desire to remain anonymous, Ifat finally agreed to provide written proof of Shazia's abuse, leading her lawyer to file a trafficking case on Shazia's behalf.

During this time, Shazia suffered from poor mental health. She cried a lot and felt disconnected from her housemates. Her appetite was poor, and she suffered from night sweats, often lying awake at night unable to sleep. She spent her sleepless nights sitting in the backyard. Shazia received counselling from an Urdu-speaking therapist, which made her stronger, and she was prescribed medication for her mental health. Shazia overdosed and was treated at her local accident and emergency department. Over time, however, with the refuge's support, Shazia made friends, learnt to cycle, opened a bank account, and began going out with her housemates.

Studies have demonstrated the links between such abuse and poor mental health (Batsleer, Burman, Chantler, McIntosh, Pantling, Smailes & Warner 2002; Chantler, Burman, Batsleer & Bashir 2001). However, in Shazia's case, her challenges included the stress brought about by her ongoing immigration case. Her disownment by her family and being completely alone further compounded her situation. Shazia said she was terrified about her future. The abuse she had

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[30] Now called the 'Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession'. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/application-for-benefits-for-visa-holder-domestic-violence (Accessed 15 July 2024).

suffered in the past and all her current problems aggravated her poor mental health (Abbas, Aqeel, Shaher, Sundas & Zhang 2019). Shazia explained, '*Uus wakth muje laga ke mai bilkul phas gai thei, mai peshe be nahi ja sakti thei, na aageh*' ('At that time, I felt like I was trapped; I could not go back to my marriage, nor go forward because of my immigration status and being disowned'). When I visited her at home, when she was living in a house of multiple occupancy (HMO) awaiting the decision about her immigration status, I saw the effect these stresses had on Shazia. Her fridge was sparsely stocked with stale food, and she had lost weight and reported sleeping poorly.

Irum's case bears many similarities to Shazia's. From this same phase, Irum's medical reports described that she appeared flat, was suffering from low mood, was tearful at times, and experienced suicidal thoughts. The reports explained that her ongoing legal case led her to experience high levels of distress, feelings of isolation, and overwhelming negative thoughts. Although family exclusion and the loss of social and familial support can be essential factors leading to poor mental health (Ahmed, Shil, Vanza, Cheung, George & Stewart 2004), other forms of exclusion and rejection, including immigration, divorce, and language barriers can also influence mental health (Sangaramoorty & Carney 2021). Although Irum said that she derived some comfort from her prayers, she also clearly suffered a great deal. Bloom's (2021) research on immigrants with experiences of intimate partner violence shows that, through community support and prayers, women can develop tools to manage their suicidal thoughts and build a sense of confidence in their future. However, Shazia and Irum lacked kin and community support and found life challenging (I shall elaborate on this in Chapter Seven).

Irum and Shazia both felt constricted and entirely at the mercy of the UK Home Office's stringent immigration policies. This situation meant they did not know if they would be safe, echoing the restrictions, abuse, and threats they had experienced in their marital homes. As Foucault (2008) argues, this administrative coercion is the state's way of exercising its power over the body and sovereignty of individuals, in a form of biopolitics exerted at the level of life. Lacking money and employment skills, Irum and Shazia could not foresee how they would survive eviction from their accommodation, the termination of their weekly stipends, or deportation.

Moreover, having been disowned by their families, they had no one to turn to, and feared deportation because of the harsh treatment they would face in their home countries. As demonstrated by a report by Malik, Saba & Abid (2021), in Pakistan, where Irum, Shazia, Lubna and Bilquis come from, the worst consequence of divorce is considered to be a woman's abandonment by her natal family, extended relatives, and friends. With nowhere to turn, women have little choice but to live in women's shelters.

Irum's and Shazia's cases point to the carcerality of the controlling authority (Moran *et al.* 2018: 678). Their movement is restricted both by formal structures ratified by the state and by family structures. They must also accept behaviours that subject them to harm (Moran *et al.* 2018: 678). Their cases also highlight the issue of time in relation to carceral experiences. As Moran *et al.* (2018) argue, carceral conditions are also about temporal distance. These women experienced detriment with lasting effects over time and space. Although intentions, such as forced marriage or domestic abuse, no longer acted on them directly, their effects persisted for a long time.
I shall now turn to Bilquis' and Lubna's cases.

Although all of my interlocutors escaped domestic carcerality after their marriages broke down, they were nonetheless confined by stringent immigration rules. Their spousal visas were terminated, exposing them to a form of structural violence that they were then forced to fight (Farmer 1996). As Hancock (2010), writing about the UK's refugee policy, argues, there is no other group of people with less control over their futures. My interlocutors had similar experiences when it came to their immigration processes, which took 9 months to 7 years.

For example, Bilquis' battle for legal rights took 2 years and 2 months. During this time, her mental health was poor, and she even experienced thoughts of suicide. She missed ESOL classes owing to poor health. Her first immigration application was rejected, and she was forced to find a new legal aid lawyer to represent her asylum case. Bilquis spent two 2 years and 2 months living in a state of immobilization, fearful of being returned home because her stepbrothers had threatened to kill her, and suffering from poor mental health.

Lubna, on the other hand, ran away from her UK Home Office accommodation when she lost her asylum case for the second time. She was petrified by the idea of being deported to Pakistan. Owing to her family's disownment, she had nowhere to go. At that point, she also gave up her voluntary work without notice. Through a local charity, Lubna found families willing to house her for up to 6 months. Finally, she found a family that was happy to accommodate her indefinitely. To survive financially, Lubna undertook cash-in-hand jobs such as cooking, babysitting, and domestic work. For 7 years, she lived a life marked by illegality, destitution, poor mental health, and fear.

Depending on how their lawyers decided to present their cases, some of the women, such as Irum, Farah, Razia, and Saira, fought for legal rights on the grounds of domestic abuse. They were housed in refuges across the United Kingdom and granted a weekly stipend of £65. Others, like Shazia and Bilquis, fought for asylum in the United Kingdom on the grounds of having been trafficked or because there was a danger to their lives if they returned home. The UK Home Office provided these women with accommodation in rooms in HMOs shared with people of different nationalities, previously unknown to them. They lived on a weekly stipend of approximately £40, and it was illegal for them to take on paid work. The interlocutors explained that when they fled their abuse, they saved their lives, but they also upset family beliefs and norms. They did not realize that escape would lead to another set of hardships.

Examining my interlocutors' cases through the concept of 'carceral escapes' demonstrates how some escapes can have indeterminate outcomes, negating the concept of a true escape. For these women, shame, stigma, and blame in relation to their broken marriages carry over from one escape context to the next, further compounding their poor mental health. This aligns with Dillon *et al.*'s (2013) review of seventy-five studies between 2006 and 2012, which attest to the connection between domestic abuse and self-harm, sleep disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety, despite cultural variations. In my interlocutors' cases, structural carcerality further exasperates their poor health.

My interlocutors demonstrated that they had experienced detriment through forced marriages and abuse, and how they had contested and resisted it (Moran *et al.* 2018: 679). They explained the pressure their families had exerted on them, attesting to the complex carceral forces through which

shame, stigma, disownment and destitution occur. They were also controlled in a spatial perspective by punitive immigration rules. Irrespective of the intentions of the UK Home Office, they experienced these controls as carceral (Moran *et al.* 2018: 679). These women's cases also show the temporality of carceral experiences, since the carceral condition (Moran *et al.* 2018) persists across various escapes, with lasting effects. Even if carceral intents cease to act directly on them, the effects, such as poor mental health, destitution, fear, and shame, persist at length.

Next, I shall illustrate the abuse these women suffer after gaining the right to remain in the United Kingdom. This aligns with Trevillion *et al.*'s (2012) study, which shows the link between domestic abuse and mental health problems, as well as the likelihood of such individuals experiencing abuse again.

Life after receiving legal rights to remain in the United Kingdom: Betrayals and entrapments

In this section, I shall refer to three cases to illustrate the challenges experienced even after the women in my study were granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom, which deprives them of opportunity or potentiality (Moran *et al.* 2018). I shall begin with Irum, who was put into domestic servitude by Aisha, the friend who took her in to help her settle in the United Kingdom. Next, I shall present the experiences of Farah and Razia, to show how these women are cheated by those they trust.

Irum explained that after being granted permission to remain in the United Kingdom, she was moved out of her women's refuge and into rented accommodation, where she was responsible for paying rent. Although the refuge had submitted her benefits application and applied for housing benefits for her, her payments had not begun. Therefore, after leaving the refuge, Irum had no money to pay the rent for her new accommodation or to cover her personal expenses. Her documents showed that she was accruing a weekly debt of approximately £250, including money borrowed to cover her personal expenses. These debts were causing Irum immense stress. At the time, she was unaware that her benefits would help pay her rent and clear her debts, and I wondered if Irum had been told this but had not understood.

Irum said that she spoke to Aisha, the only person she knew in the United Kingdom, about her situation. Instead of reassuring her, Aisha filled Irum with fears of falling into further debt and getting into trouble with the law. Irum explained, '*Mia bilkul phas gai thie*' ('I was very stuck/ensnarled'). As such, when Aisha encouraged her to come and live with her, Irum explained that she had no choice but to agree. At Aisha's home, Irum had no money, except for a few pounds that Aisha gave her for personal expenses. Her benefits commenced after 3 months, but only after she and I went to the Job Centre to provide the information required to process her application. I believed Irum because that is how Aisha had explained Irum's situation at the start of the fieldwork. I had trusted Aisha because at the time I did not understand the benefits system. Moreover, in the early days of the fieldwork, I thought Aisha seemed very caring towards Irum and I had no reason to doubt her.

However, I gradually began to feel uneasy about Aisha's behaviour. I observed Irum cook, clean, and babysit while Aisha worked on a daily basis. Aisha became aggressive when Irum said that she would not be available to babysit for her because she wanted to attend English classes or look for voluntary work. Irum always gave in to Aisha's forcefulness. Frustratedly, referring to Aisha's controlling attitude, she would say, 'I should be allowed to do what I want to do'. To avoid Aisha's wrath, Irum decided to attend English lessons with Aisha's baby, but none were available (I will elaborate on this in Chapter Six). Soon after, Aisha stopped Irum from going anywhere for a few weeks because she had guests and needed her help with household chores, to care for her child, and to babysit the guests' children. Aisha also stopped me from meeting with Irum. The only occasions when she was permitted time off, even with the guests present, were to visit the Sharia Council or to meet with her lawyer about her divorce case. I later learnt that Aisha was pushing for Irum's divorce so that she could marry her to her brother from Pakistan to help him migrate to the United Kingdom – something Irum did not want. Irum feared that marrying Aisha's brother would mean that she would remain under their control.

In those early days, Irum was sacred about upsetting Aisha. She felt that she could not stand up to Aisha because, with her benefits yet to start, she had no money, was in debt, and did not understand her legal rights. Compounding this, Irum knew that she could not survive without Aisha's help because of her poor English language and digital skills and her limited knowledge of life in the United Kingdom, including managing bank accounts, landlords, utility bills, travel, registering with a GP, and other formal processes. Aisha managed her bank and email accounts and advised her on everything. Irum told me, very upset, that Aisha would not allow her to try to fill out forms or reply to emails herself. As a result, Irum remained wholly dependent on Aisha, which prevented her from gaining independence and escaping the toxic situation in which she was trapped.

Although her support worker, who was assisting with her trafficking case with the UK Home Office, and I urged her to move out or stand up to Aisha, Irum was unable to do so. Irum explained that although she felt scared and loathed Aisha's aggression, she could not cut Aisha off because she was the only person she knew in the United Kingdom. Irum explained that she had not been like this back home, but since her experiences at her in-laws' home, her UK immigration case, and being disowned by her family, she had felt terrified, vulnerable, and unable to stand up for herself. She had also always lived within a family context and felt she did not have the confidence, knowledge, or skills to live alone. Irum would often say, 'Aisha knows so much; she has everything, and I don't. How will I ever become independent like her?'

On one visit, when I rang the doorbell to Aisha's flat, Irum opened the door but kept the security chain on. She looked scared. I immediately sensed that something was wrong. My instinctive reaction was to leave.[31] However, I quickly gathered myself, calmed my fears, and entered the flat. I was relieved to see that there was no one else there. Irum explained that her in-laws had been furious when they received her *khula* papers. To seek their revenge, they arranged for Aisha's and Irum's brothers to be detained by the police in Pakistan on false charges. Irum wanted me to speak

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[31] As mentioned in the introduction, at the start of the fieldwork, I was advised to leave if I instinctually felt uneasy or scared.

to Aisha to gain a full understanding of the situation, so we went to meet Aisha at work. She gave me a copy of the report describing their brothers' imprisonment. (I verified the authenticity of the report through my contacts in Pakistan.) In light of these developments, Aisha said that Irum should move out of her flat because her in-laws knew she was living with her, and she was worried they might come after her.[32] Irum asked her support worker to help her apply for housing as a homeless person. Soon after that, Irum's local borough moved Irum to a room in an HMO with people she did not know.

Unfortunately, the controlling dynamic between Irum and Aisha continued. Aisha insisted that Irum come to the flat every morning to babysit, clean, and cook while she went to work. She offered no remuneration for these services. Although Irum's support worker and I coached Irum on pushing back and refusing Aisha's demands, Irum could not stand up to her. Finally, after a great deal of reflection on her ethical dilemma, Irum faced the choice of either reporting Aisha, which could get her into trouble, or remaining trapped in the situation. Finally, with her support worker's help, Irum wrote to her local borough to request a transfer to alternative accommodation in another borough to escape Aisha's control. In her communications, Irum described her issues with Aisha but did not explicitly identify her. These dynamics continued until one day, Aisha, who had access to Irum's email account, without her consent, read Irum's email to the local authority, which explained her request to move to a new accommodation. After a heated argument, the two women had a major falling out, and Aisha never contacted Irum again. Unfortunately, after the fieldwork and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Irum was severely abused by her housemates after an alcohol-fuelled evening at home. Irum, the only non-drinker, became a target for them to bully and threaten. After this, Irum moved back into a refuge, where she still lives now. This 'lamination' (Holland & Leander 2004) of challenging experiences exacerbated Irum's vulnerability, as she navigated a series of harsh, unsettling environments (Vigh 2009). Such experiences included domestic abuse, abandonment, destitution, and poor mental health, leaving Irum unable to stand up to Aisha or her housemates.

Studying Irum's case through the 'carceral escapes' framework sheds light on how her vulnerabilities led her into Aisha's control and to her confinement in a situation of domestic servitude. Irum's case demonstrates forms of carcerality as Aisha intentionally confiscated Irum's opportunities (Moran *et al.* 2018) while accommodating her under the pretence of supporting her. This situation persisted even after she moved into independent accommodation (Moran *et al.* 2018). I shall now turn to the experiences of Farah and Razia, who did not move into a women's refuge, or an HMO provided by the UK Home Office. Rather, after leaving their abusive marital homes, they went on to face different forms of carcerality from people they lived with and trusted. I shall begin with Farah's case study.

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[32] I was very worried. I knew that Irum's father-in-law had threatened her with a knife. Now, he had put two innocent men in jail. I wondered whether Irum's in-laws would come after me because I had assisted Irum with her divorce. That day, I felt overwhelmed and considered distancing myself from Irum. My supervisors advised me to prioritise my comfort and safety. However, I decided that I could not abandon Irum. It did not feel ethically correct. To ensure my safety, I never met Irum at the flat where we could be alone. Instead, to stay safe, I only ever met her in public spaces.

One day, almost 3 months after I first met Farah, we were sitting in Farah's room, and she was telling me about her housemate Razia's police case. She wanted to know if I could help Razia. Mid-sentence, Farah closed her eyes, held onto her stomach, and took a deep breath, as if suffering from stomach cramps. I gave her an enquiring look, and she said, 'Oh, nothing'. I smiled and said, 'Farah, tell me, I might be able to help', to which she responded, 'It's embarrassing'. I smiled again and said she had already shared so much with me; maybe she might want to tell me about this, too. Farah scanned the floor, searching for something. Giving me a worried look, she said that she and her flatmates were suffering from stomach cramps. Very embarrassed, Farah said that it was a result of a mouse infestation. I immediately got goosebumps. As inconspicuously and calmly as possible, while looking for evidence of infestation, I lifted my bag and jacket off the floor. I was not sure what to look for. I had no experience of mouse infestations and did not know whether it could cause stomach aches.

Farah seemed convinced about the mice, so I asked if she had spoken to her landlord. Sighing in frustration, Farah said she had called her landlord, telling him they could not live like this. Rolling her eyes, Farah said he asked her to contact the local council for help. Seeming frustrated, Farah said, 'How can I call the council? My English is so poor'. As her English teacher at a local charity (which is how we met), I understood her English language struggles and her feelings of exasperation. Owing to my inexperience on the matter, I asked if Farah would like me to consult someone who was more knowledgeable about her tenant's rights. Looking relieved, she immediately agreed. I called my contact, who informed us that it was the landlord's responsibility to deal with a mouse infestation, and that if the landlord refused, the tenants had limited options. Although this was honest advice, it did not solve the issue. I felt I had to do more. I asked Farah if she wanted to show me her tenancy agreement to understand her rights. Very relieved, Farah opened her cupboard and brought out a large carrier bag full of papers. It reminded me of Irum's bundles of unfiled documents I had helped organize. I had to sift through several papers to find the tenancy agreement. In so doing, I unearthed some fascinating information, which Farah allowed me to read and include in this thesis. In the next section, I shall describe what I discovered.

Among Farah's papers, I found a letter written by the Practice Manager at Farah's GP practice on the day she fled from her in-laws' house, addressed to the Met Police. It stated that the GP had raised a case of domestic abuse for Farah. As I rummaged further, I found a non-molestation application[33] made 10 days after the letter from the GP. Farah was granted the non-molestation order 17 days later. Keeping these documents aside, I carried on looking and uncovered a lodger's agreement signed by two parties, Farah and her landlord, for a room at an address in a neighbouring borough lasting 9 months. It specified weekly rent of £70 and no deposit payment. The agreement was dated precisely 1 week after the letter from the GP practice to the police.

I felt uneasy because I was sure that, in previous conversations, Farah had mentioned that, after leaving her in-laws' home, she had stayed with an English lawyer, whose Bangladeshi wife was from the same town as Farah's family. She stayed with them because the lawyer and his wife

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[33] A court order protecting a person and any relevant child/children from abuse or harassment by a named person, or to prevent them living in your home. See: https://www.gov.uk/injunction-domestic-violence/eligibility-non-molestation (Accessed 29 July 2024).

assured Farah and her family that it would be safer than a women's refuge, which they believed was unsafe. They assured Farah's family that they would take good care of her. As I searched, I found an identical lodger's agreement for Farah's current room. Although it was similar to the first one, it was dated 10 months after the first agreement (when Farah was granted her residency rights in the United Kingdom) and terminated 6 months later. There was no other lodger's agreement for Farah's room. I wondered who Farah's landlord was and how they had met. Perplexed, I asked if there were any other documents, but Farah assured me that all her documents were in that bag.

I showed Farah the GP's letter. I touched her arm gently and looked at her before softly saying, 'Farah, I just can't imagine how you felt sitting in the GP's surgery all day and all by yourself'. At that point, as Farah focused her attention on my words, the issue of the mouse infestation faded into the background. Farah explained that her in-laws had been in Bangladesh when she fled her marital home. She looked heartbroken as she described her husband's increasingly abusive behaviour while they were alone. Recalling the day she had left; she explained that he shouted at her. Farah said she turned her back to avoid confrontation, pretending to cook and hoping to diffuse the matter. Instead, her husband was so vexed by this that he came at her, squeezed her neck, and threatened to kill her. With no one else in the house to stop him, Farah said she was petrified that her husband would lose control, in which case there was no telling what he might do. Farah fled from the house.

Farah said that she had run away to the police once before when things had turned violent. On that occasion, her in-laws and her husband pleaded with her not to make a police report. They assured her that things would improve, and so Farah returned. After that first incident, each time the police called to check on Farah, her in-laws ensured she never spoke to them alone and that she reassured them that everything had settled down. Her in-laws never showed Farah any correspondence from the police. One day, Farah found a police letter in the rubbish bin and realized that her in-laws were hiding things from her. Farah said that when she fled the second time, the experience was very confusing and stressful. As she was not sure if the police would believe her, she went to her GP's surgery instead. Farah gave me a sad look and said she was so scared on that day that she decided never to return to her marital home. As the police could not find a space in a women's refuge for Farah, they put her up in a hotel for two nights.

The next day, the police sent a woman, possibly from social services, to meet Farah. Farah said she was scared and confused about who the woman was. She took Farah to an office where she phoned to see if she could find a space in a refuge, but none were available. Then, she took Farah to a lawyer's office, where she met her landlord, also a lawyer. He assured Farah that he would find her accommodation and take care of her legal matters. To comfort Farah, the lawyer introduced her to his Bangladeshi wife, who is from the same town as Farah. The lawyer suggested to Farah's parents (who were in touch over the phone from Bangladesh) that Farah move in with them, where she would be safe, while he processed Farah's non-molestation order through legal aid. Farah, looking upset, said her poor English language skills and understanding of the bureaucratic systems further heightened her stress and anxiety. She was confused about her rights, the role people played in her case, and how to stay safe and tackle her legal battles.

Returning to her in-laws or going back to Bangladesh following a broken marriage were both unbearable options for Farah. Her parents also did not want her to return, believing that it would taint their reputation and ruin their younger daughter's options for a good marriage. When her husband choked her, Farah faced a crisis: to save her life, she fled, taking nothing with her. When she had fled once before, she chose to return. This time, although Farah had never wanted her marriage to break down, she decided not to return, and her life was never the same again. Farah explained that these experiences had left her feeling broken and stressed. In this vulnerable, anxious state, she was grateful for the lawyer's help.

I showed Farah both lodgers' agreements. I explained that because they had expired, she could not make any demands of her landlord. I also explained that the agreement was simple and included little legal protection. Farah was confused when she realized that her lodger's agreement had started a week after leaving her in-laws' home. Farah looked at me and explained that she thought the lawyer had put her up as a favour because she and his wife were from the same area in Bangladesh. Once again, Farah described how the lawyer and his wife had reassured her parents that they would look after her. Alone and vulnerable, Farah felt she had nowhere else to go. She explained that while she was living with the lawyer's family, she always felt a strong sense of obligation towards them because they had provided her with what she believed to be free accommodation and food. She made sure to help around the house, look after their child, and avoid causing any inconvenience. Farah explained that once she was granted legal rights to remain in the United Kingdom, her lawyer applied for her benefits and offered Farah rental accommodation in his property. Farah and her family agreed because they felt safe having a landlord they knew and trusted. They also relied on him to assist Farah with any legal matters, which she was unable to manage on her own.

I explained to Farah that, from my understanding of people's experiences, women's refuges are safe places that provide counselling and support to help women adjust to living independently. Most women's refuges also help with legal matters and help women to move into rented accommodation covered by housing benefits. Farah looked at me and said that perhaps going to a women's refuge would have made her more robust and streetwise. Then in a quiet, embarrassed, but angry voice, she said, 'I think he (the landlord) is very "*chalak*" ("sly/clever")'. Farah explained that she feared him because he could be ruthless. She had witnessed another tenant, a woman who had experienced domestic abuse, argue with him over her tenancy agreement, after which he forced her to leave. To remain on his good side, Farah was careful not to upset or challenge him. She feared that if she angered him, he might evict her, and she would have nowhere to go. It was clear that, at the time, Farah did not fully understand her housing rights as a recipient of benefits. Recently, her landlord had also received correspondence regarding Farah's divorce, for which she needed his help, which made Farah even more cautious about upsetting him.

Farah's documents suggest that when Farah left her marital home, her lawyer took her in and applied for her non-molestation order and her DDV concession. He kept her as a lodger at his home for 10 months, charging £70 per week in rent, which was covered by Farah's benefits after she received the DDV concession. I asked Farah if she received benefits after being granted her non-molestation order. Looking perplexed, she explained that her benefits payments started when she was granted legal status to reside in the United Kingdom. After speaking to Razia, she realized

that Razia received benefits soon after leaving her marital home because, like Farah, she had applied for a DDV concession. Farah said that she went to the Job Centre to enquire about her past benefits but did not understand what they said.

I asked her if she understood the documents she had signed. Farah gave me a look as if to say, 'what can I do?' and replied, 'No, I just sign; I trust and sign the papers people give me. I cannot read nor understand what the documents say'. Having received the same response from almost all the women I researched, I believed Farah. During my fieldwork, I witnessed women sign documents without understanding their contents because they could not read them. No one explained the documents to them. Often, they did not understand the consequences of signing, nor did they have someone trustworthy who could help them. These conditions led to misinformation, doubt, suspicion, and insecurity, leaving these women vulnerable and fearful.

As I presented her with the facts, I sensed that things were beginning to make sense to Farah. After a short silence, she said, 'I think that without telling me, he (the lawyer) has taken my benefits money and my housing benefits for the 10 months I stayed with him'. Farah thus realized that he had intentionally cheated her. It is also important to note, however, that Farah did not wish to upset the lawyer or lose his support because he was helping her with all her affairs. Even during fieldwork, Farah repeatedly said that although she understood he had misled her, she did not want to spoil her relationship with him because she was aware of her vulnerabilities. With a soft smile, I leaned forward and gave her arm a light squeeze to show her that I understood the ethical challenges she faced. I wondered what Razia's situation was.

After a few minutes, I gently asked Farah if she still wanted to speak to me about Razia. Farah said that she would call Razia to talk with me directly. I only knew Razia in passing. She was always quiet and reserved. She mainly spoke Bengali and struggled with her spoken English, which made it hard for me to connect with her (unlike all my other interlocutors, who spoke Urdu). Farah explained that Razia could not understand why she would share so much with me. Nonetheless, I always remained friendly towards her, asked about her studies, and offered to help her with her English. Razia was always polite but distant. Today, when Razia entered the room, I sensed a shift in her demeanour. Speaking in Bengali (with Farah translating for us), Farah asked Razia if she wanted my help with the police situation. I smiled at Razia and reassured her that she could trust me, as I would always maintain her confidentiality. Razia smiled and said that she had got to know me better through Farah and trusted me. Suddenly, with no prior intention to do so, I asked if Razia would be happy to participate in my research, and she agreed.

The conversation returned to the infestation issue that Farah and Razia were facing. I asked Razia if she had a tenancy agreement. Razia went away and returned with several papers bundled together in a folder, just like Irum and Farah. She permitted me to go through the documents and make a record of whatever I needed. Razia had a lodger's agreement that was identical to Farah's. The first agreement was for a room at the lawyer's home address, dated 2 weeks after she had fled from her marital home. The second one, for Razia's current room, was dated 2 months later. Both agreements expired within 9 months. When I showed Razia the two agreements, she confirmed that she had stayed with her aunt Mina after fleeing her in-laws' home. She had come to this flat 2 months later, which was the date on her second lodger's agreement. These documents showed

that both women had signed lodger agreements for a room in the lawyer's home without fully comprehending what they were signing. In both cases, the landlord was also the lawyer who applied for their non-molestation order, and in both cases he made the women sign a lodger's agreement for a room in his home. Razia had never stayed in his house, and Farah had remained under the impression that she was a house guest.

At first, I wondered whether Farah had misunderstood her housing arrangements at the lawyer's home. However, once I had seen Razia's lodger's agreement for a room in his home, I felt certain that, unbeknown to them, the lawyer who had processed their non-molestation orders and DDV concession applications had also applied for housing payments made payable to him using the tenancy agreements signed by both girls. As for their current rights as tenants, it was clear that Farah and Razia had no legal tenancy contract, no rights as lodgers, and could face eviction at any point in time, which is precisely what their landlord did a year later, during COVID-19. All of his tenants, including Farah and Razia, received a month's notice to move out. Farah and Razia said they felt stuck and destitute. They had nowhere to go, lacked the means to enter into a legal fight with their landlord, and feared homelessness – a terrifying prospect for single young women in their situation. They asked me to help them communicate with their local authority to try and secure accommodation, feeling at the mercy of their borough's homeless unit. While some people use social connections to further their chances in life (Gardner 2012), these cases illustrate that, under the pretext of helping, trusted people can take advantage of people's vulnerabilities, curtailing their potential to live more freely.

Owing to their vulnerabilities, loneliness, and past experiences, these women's cases are characterized by carceral conditions of detriment and lost opportunity and potentiality (Moran *et al.* 2018). Possibly harbouring determinantal intentions, the lawyer misrepresented his offers of help and cheated Farah economically. Unbeknown to Farah and Razia, he used their benefits to rent a room in his house. He also housed Farah under false pretences. Cheated out of her benefits entitlements, Farah felt unable to move anywhere else. She also felt that living with her lawyer meant she had missed the opportunity to learn how to be independent by living in a women's refuge. In turn, Farah felt cheated of the potential to improve her social and economic conditions. As argued by Moran *et al.* (2018), a carceral condition involves the confiscation of an opportunity or potentiality that would otherwise have been available and whose loss is experienced as detrimental, as these cases highlight.

I proceeded to ask Razia if she needed more help. Razia explained that she wanted to know why her aunt had not returned her documents, money, and jewellery after winning a court case against her. Then, Razia went to her room and returned with her police statement. The statement stated that Razia had contacted her aunt upon receiving a deportation letter from the UK authorities 6 months after she arrived in the United Kingdom on a spousal visa. Razia's husband had written to the UK immigration authorities and cancelled her spousal visa because of the marital breakdown, triggering her deportation (as described in Chapter Three). Razia was devastated and filled with anxiety. On her stepmother's advice, she called her maternal aunt, who took Razia to her house. Razia's aunt instructed the police to collect Razia's documents, jewellery, and personal belongings from her husband's house, which her aunt then retained for safekeeping.

The statement specified that within 2 weeks, her aunt began pressuring Razia to marry her 22-year-old nephew, who lived in Bangladesh, so that he could migrate to the United Kingdom on a spousal visa. Feeling stressed and low after her difficult marital experiences, Razia refused. Her aunt continued to pressurize her. In a low voice, Razia said that she never wanted to marry, neither then nor now, feeling that she could not trust men. Then, Farah explained that after Razia moved to the flat when she visited her aunt, her aunt forced her to perform the marriage *Aqd* (marriage contract) over the phone under Islamic law. When Razia refused, her aunt became very angry and turned nasty towards Razia.

Razia's statement also sets out that she had applied for benefits, which she received 7 months later. Her benefits totalled over £1,700. The statement specifies that she received a letter informing her of the payment before receiving the benefits money into her bank account. Given Razia's poor English, at the time she asked her aunt to explain what the letter said. A few days later, her aunt advised Razia that it was not good to have so much cash in the bank while unemployed. She instructed Razia to take the money out and give it to her for safekeeping. Razia had no one else from whom to seek advice; so, trusting her aunt, she withdrew the cash and handed it to her. Since then, her aunt has not returned the money or the jewellery. Whenever Razia asked for her possessions, her aunt would come up with an excuse. I paused, looked at Razia and said, 'It seems to me that although she is your aunt, who you trust, she has cheated you'. Both women nodded. Razia shrugged, gave me a glum look, and said, 'What can I do? I had no one else to turn to for advice or support'. The statement also specified that Razia's aunt had called her recently and asked her to bring her passport and biometric card to her because the lawyer needed the documents to process the divorce applied for by her husband. Razia could not deliver the documents because she was ill, so her aunt sent her brother, Razia's uncle, to collect them from her flat. Razia said that she handed all her documents to him in good faith.

A few days later, when she called her aunt for an update about the divorce, she said that she did not know anything about the matter or about Razia's passport. Razia reminded her aunt about her call to ask for the passport and that her brother had collected the documents. Still, her aunt denied any knowledge of Razia's documents. Farah intervened at this point and said that when Razia asked her aunt about her jewellery, money, and documents, she asked why Razia needed them. Looking outraged, Farah said, 'You have no idea how rudely she spoke to Razia; she was swearing so much'. Farah explained that both she and her flatmate had listened to the conversation. Farah said they told Razia to record the call, and thankfully Razia did. Farah and Razia explained that they used the recording as evidence against the aunt when they reported her to the police.

Then, Razia showed me a text message on her phone that she had received from the police 4 months earlier. It read as follows:

> Mrs Razia – This text is from the XXX Police Northeast Area Witness Care Unit to notify you of the outcome of your case: 000000 (Court Ref: xxxx-xxx), concerning the Theft in March 2017 and Fraud in Dec 2017. The defendant was sentenced at XXX Crown Court on 16/11/2018. Results as follows: nine months imprisonment suspended for 12 months on suspended sentence – must undertake work as advised by the Probation Service for a maximum of 10 days, to Pay a Surcharge of £xxx to Court, Restraining Order granted for

3 years. This case is now finished. If you need to, you can contact K at xxxx or email on xxxx. PLEASE DO NOT REPLY TO THIS TEXT VIA TEXT, as I cannot access them, but call or email me instead. Thank you.

The message showed that Razia had won a 3-year restraining order against her aunt. However, owing to her limited language skills and lack of trusted support, Razia did not seek any help in translating the order or reclaiming her money and jewellery. Razia wanted me to contact the police and find out what she should do next. The police officer explained that retrieving the items was not her responsibility and asked if Razia had filled out a Compensation Form immediately after winning her case. When I said that Razia was unaware of the form, the officer promised to investigate the matter and follow up with Razia. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, Razia has still not recovered any belongings from her aunt.

The application of the 'carceral escape' concept and Moran *et al.*'s (2018) three carceral conditions – detriment, intention and spatiality – underscores the carceral experiences suffered by my interlocutors. These include being intentionally forced into marriage (in some cases) and being subjected to abuse in their marital homes (in all cases), which they experienced as deliberately harmful. Being forced into domestic spaces of abuse meant that the women missed out on opportunities that would otherwise have been available to them – a loss they experienced as detrimental (Moran *et al.*: 2018). According to Moran *et al.* (2018: 677-8), 'detriment' encompasses both physical confinement in particular locations and the precariousness faced in civil society, capturing the physical and psychological suffering connected with illegality.

The 'carceral escape' concept also highlights the spatial-temporal nature of detriment, a carceral condition caused by symptoms that limit people (Moran *et al.* 2018: 278), such as poor mental health, fear, and shame, which women experience across different challenging life events marked by confinement and control. This situation prevents them from fully engaging in a social life, while subjecting them to aches, pains, sleepless nights, and anxiety. The women explained to me that their poor mental health reduced their personal potential, which, in turn, led them to miss out on advantageous social and economic opportunities (Moran *et al.* 2018: 677).

Once the women had been granted permission to remain in the United Kingdom, they no longer had to harbour fears about their immigration cases. However, despite escaping these particular concerns, their vulnerabilities led to them being subjected to a new set of carceral conditions. For example, Irum felt entrapped under Aisha's control and the situation of domestic servitude to which she subjected her – a form of carcerality involving an intentional confiscation of opportunity (Moran *et al.* 2018). Irum experienced Aisha's carceral intentions not only while living in her home, but also after she escaped the confinement of her flat and was living independently. Similarly, Farah and Razia also suffered carceral experiences when trusted people took advantage of their vulnerabilities by cheating and robbing them. Both women explained that being robbed of money and jewellery and misinformed and cheated led to a situation of economic precarity and a loss of social and economic opportunity. With no money or anywhere to live independently, Farah explained that she felt restricted. Razia's and Farah's cases point to their increased vulnerabilities following their escape from carceral situations.

Unlike the experiences of South Asian women typically examined in family and community settings, my interlocutors were young, single women with no natal family in the United Kingdom. Their poor support networks and the dishonesty of their extended family and trusted professionals further compounded these women's vulnerabilities. Similarly, in a study of 35 immigrant women who have experienced domestic abuse, Liversage (2022: NP13203-4) finds that women often struggle with interactions because they hold disadvantaged positions within family, social, and national hierarchies. Moreover, owing to their past experiences, legal precarity, lack of knowledge and skills, and poor mental health, they are vulnerable to deception and entrapment.

Conclusion

At the start of my research, I was curious about the reasons for Irum's persistent low mood, despite her being legally secure and seemingly living safely and with support. I suspected that there must be other challenging events in Irum's life that required further investigation. A closer examination revealed that my interlocutors had been through several unabating, harsh experiences in their transnational marriages. To comprehend these challenges across several life events, I applied the 'ethical (re)positioning' concept, coupled with the understanding of the carceral proposed by human geographers Moran *et al.* (2018). Moran *et al.* argue that settings outside the penal system can also be understood as carceral, on the basis of their involvement of three key carceral conditions – intent, detriment, spatiality and the confiscation of potentiality, all of which can be exercised spatially and temporally and can have lasting effects. These experiences are relative, subjectively perceived, and articulated through social relations. This inclusion of individual lived experiences is helpful in that it underscores the individual's interpretation and perception of such experiences of constraint. By broadening the carceral beyond physical incarceration, various forms of social and psychological confinement are included. This allows for a deeper understanding of how my interlocutors personally navigated their institutional, personal, and interpersonal challenges and their subjective responses to carceral conditions. To investigate how their escapes led to new forms of carceral conditions, how the carceral becomes a part of the escape process, and its various outcomes, I developed the conceptual framework of 'carceral escapes'.

This framework differs from other studies of carcerality, such as Cassidy's (2019) model of a 'continuum of unfreedom', Hamlin and Speer's (2018) metaphor of a 'carceral continuum', Gill *et al.*'s (2018) concept of 'carceral circuitry', and Doughty (2020) 'carceral repairs'. Compared to these discussions, the concept of 'carceral escapes' broadens the analytical gaze in several key respects. First, it illuminates the recurring nature of carceral experiences, both structurally and interpersonally, over consecutive life events, across time and space, as enforced by institutions, families, and social actors, and with enduring effects. For example, experiences of domestic abuse in forced marriages, followed by deportation threats and destitution shed light on the interconnection between familial institutions and punitive national and transnational bureaucracies, in a form of 'bureaucratic torture' (Smadar Lavie 2014). Second, it highlights how carceral experiences can continue after escaping one situation and moving into the next, for instance through the lingering effects of shame, stigma, and trauma following abuse, which persist in the body and mind (Bessel van der Kolk 2014). These feelings lead not only to mental health issues, which hinder women from achieving their full potential, but also to feelings of shame and

stigma, which – keeping women away from supportive networks in their communities – lead to isolation and loneliness, further exacerbating their mental health issues. These vulnerabilities (re)position these women in situations in which they are cheated by people they trust.

Third, it reveals how carceral experiences are intertwined with the process of escape, undermining the idea of a true escape; instead, each attempt to escape leads to new forms of entrapment or immobilization. For instance, despite escaping abuse and threats to their lives in their marital homes, the women then face the termination of their spousal visas and threats of deportation. As divorced women, they must then face stigmatization and fear of mistreatment in their homeland, along with limited prospects for achieving a satisfactory quality of life. Fourth, this framework highlights the intended and unintended outcomes of each escape, involving repeated or diminishing challenges. For example, when Irum fled her marriage, she did not envisage the problems she would face. She escaped a situation of domestic abuse, deportation threats, and family abandonment but then fell into domestic servitude at the hands of someone she trusted, before then being abused by her housemates. As a result of the lamination of all these experiences, Irum has suffered with mental health problems. Fearing living alone and feeling confined by her past difficulties and poor mental health, Irum moved into a woman's refuge to rebuild her life. Farah and Razia also did not foresee that people they trusted would cheat them of their valuables, try to force them into another marriage, and hinder them from living independent lives. However, some years later, both women are happily remarried. Irum's, Farah's, and Razia's cases thus illustrate varied escape outcomes.

The analytical framework of 'carceral escapes' emphasizes a dynamic of successive longitudinal forms of carcerality across time and space, with intended and unintended outcomes. It could be used to add a transnational perspective to the relationship between domestic abuse and mental health and to demonstrate the spatial and temporal nature of existential vulnerabilities, the lamination of past experiences, and repeated carcerality.

In their journeys of self-becoming, through repeated (re)positions and increasing laminations (Holland & Leander 2004), women navigate complex environments marked by constant flux and ambiguity, traversing institutional and social dynamics that move them along in unexpected ways (Vigh 2009). Faced with ethical challenges and ethical dilemmas ranging from contesting, accepting, or actively shifting their status quo, these women experience a constantly shifting process of self-becoming. For example, to 'keep going' as best possible, Irum and Farah fled their marriages in the face of death threats and chose not to return, despite not wanting their marriages to break down. Shazia faced charges of theft when her husband handed her to the police. In the face of her ethical dilemma, Shazia decided to follow her neighbour Ifat's advice and make a statement to the police about the abuse she had suffered. And against her parents' wishes, she did not return to her marriage. All the women in my study decided not to return to their abusive marriages. As a result, their lives changed dramatically, and they never returned to a 'state of unreflective morality' (Zigon 2007). After Irum was granted legal rights to remain in the United Kingdom, she decided to remain in the situation of domestic servitude in which she was living because of her vulnerabilities, until she finally developed the strength to move away from Aisha. Contrastingly, Razia decided to take her aunt to court and lost her connection with a relative she had in the United Kingdom. In the face of complex situations and ethical dilemmas, such choices

demonstrate these women's resolve, leading to unexpected outcomes, where returning to an 'unreflective comfort' (Zigon 2007) did not seem an option. Through multiple carceral escapes across several (re)positions, their process of self-becoming is reflective and reactionary, involving resilience and strength but also challenging emotions, as well as mental health issues and situations of economic, social, and legal precarity.

In the next two chapters, I shall apply the 'ethical (re)positioning' analytical approach to examine women's processes of self-becoming by exploring how they face their initial settlement challenges and transition from welfare to work within a welfare system underpinned by a carceral logic. During this phase, women are (re)positioned as legal residents who must either fend for themselves economically or apply for benefits and council housing before transitioning into paid employment. As these chapters will show, owing to the curtailment of their education or the poor education they had received in their home countries, coupled with being restricted in the domestic sphere in their marital homes, these women faced significant challenges as they navigated carceral escapes alone in the United Kingdom within a punitive welfare state.

CHAPTER FIVE

NAVIGATING VULNERABILITIES AND SETTLEMENT – EXPERIENCES OF LIFE AFTER LEGAL RIGHTS TO REMAIN IN THE UK

Irum: Jobcentre Plus Experiences

Soon after we first met, Irum asked if I would accompany her to her Jobcentre Plus appointment. She wanted to understand why her benefits payments were late and how much she should expect to receive. I said, 'Of course!' I had never visited a Jobcentre before and was curious to find out how they worked. At the entrance, a male greeter asked Irum the reason for her visit. Irum struggled to answer. I found myself intervening again, even though I felt uncomfortable doing so. Although Irum regularly struggled with communicating in English, I did not want to repeatedly interrupt and detract from her confidence, independence, and learning. By this point, I had already supported her at the library, with making photocopies at newsagents, asking for directions in the street, filling out forms, checking her bank balance, and registering with the GP: all tasks she needed to navigate after leaving the women's refuge. That day, at the Jobcentre, I could see that Irum needed support. I whispered the correct responses to her, to help Irum answer herself and make it to her appointment.

Irum's work coach was a pleasant, middle-aged white lady who spoke to Irum in English. She was situated on the upper floor. The room had several partitioned desks where work coaches met their clients. Irum's work coach explained that her benefits were late owing to inaccuracies in the online benefits application that staff at the women's refuge had submitted on Irum's behalf. Consequently, from mid-September 2018, when she left her refuge, until early November 2018, Irum had had no money to cover her expenses and accommodation. Her work coach informed her that she could use the benefits calculator website to calculate her benefits and housing rental entitlement. Sensing that Irum could not understand the conversation, I felt uneasy as I did not wish to intervene. However, the blank look on Irum's face and the critical information her work coach was giving made it impossible for me to remain silent. I interjected and interpreted the entire conversation, feeling like a go-between.

Irum and I found the benefits calculation website very confusing.[34] The questions assumed that the person answering was well-informed about UK employment and housing rules. For example, I was unsure which term most accurately described Irum's situation – 'homeless,' 'temporary accommodation,' or 'living rent-free with friends/family'. All these terms described Irum's situation in some way. I could not respond to the question about whether Irum had received benefits, and Irum could not tell me if the money she received while she was staying at the women's refuge was a form of government benefit. My knowledge of the terms used on the website, such as 'Jobseekers Allowance,' 'Income support,' or 'Employment and Support Allowance', was poor.

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[34] See https://www.entitledto.co.uk/ (Accessed 20 February 2025)

Navigating a bureaucratic e-service labyrinth requires good English-language and digital skills, as well as knowledge of UK Government and institutional bureaucracies and jargon. I realized that, even without a language barrier, completing an e-government form was no mean feat.

Irum did not have a smartphone or access to a computer and was unable to use either. She explained that Aisha could access her Jobcentre Plus account. I realized that she was forced to rely on others to navigate her digital and paper communications on essential matters concerning her settlement phase. Irum also relied on Aisha for help with important settlement issues, including travel, banking, and her divorce. As I described earlier, after leaving the women's refuge, Irum moved in with Aisha; because of her broken cousin marriage, she did not have any family or community connections, and Aisha was the only person Irum could rely upon for assistance with settling into life in the United Kingdom. Consequently, as explained in Chapter Four, she was scared to leave Aisha.

I have already described my interlocutors' journeys as young, hopeful brides migrating to the United Kingdom through transnational marriages, which subsequently break down owing to situations of domestic abuse. In this chapter, as well as in Chapter Six, I apply the 'ethical (re)positioning' conceptual framework to examine how my interlocutors subsequently (re)positioned themselves as women with legal rights to reside as single women in the United Kingdom. In this chapter, I shall examine how these women navigate the first twenty-eight-day period – the 'move-on period'[35] – after which their financial support from the Home Office terminates, and they face eviction from their accommodation. In Chapter Six, I shall then examine how these women transition from welfare to paid employment. As suggested in previous chapters, owing to their carceral experiences, these women lack the education required to navigate bureaucratic processes or enter paid work. Owing to the isolating situations of domestic abuse they experience in the United Kingdom; they have poor language and digital capabilities and insufficient knowledge of life in the country. They also experience a lamination of experiences, including poor mental health, loneliness, shame, and stigma. Together, these past carceral experiences carry into and compound their dependency and vulnerability in the following phase, as they transition towards independent living.

Once these women are granted the right to live in the United Kingdom, overnight they are deemed independent individuals with the legal right to work in the country. Several NGOs have pointed out that the 28-day period is short and recommend extending it to 56 days (see footnote 33). This early phase is challenging to navigate, especially for those with low levels of education and English skills (Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson & Qayyum 2013: 129), making it even harder to access information, which is an integral part of the early settlement phase (George & Chaze 2009). Therefore, despite being eligible for benefits and housing, these women lack the skills needed to understand and navigate the system. As George & Chaze (2009: 272-3) explain in relation to fifty South Asian women they studied in Toronto in this early settlement phase, relatives and friends are the most important sources of information and orientation during this period. Religious

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[35]https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/the-costs-of-destitution#:~:text=When%20a%20person%20is%20recognised,people%20being%20granted%20refugee%20status.&text=What's%20wrong%20with%20the%20move%2Don%20period? (Accessed on 5 February 2025). My interlocutors faced the 'move-on period' before the changes introduced in August 2023.

institutions also play an important role. Such support was scarce for my interlocutors, however. It is also important to note that the main barriers to their digital independence are primarily social, economic, and technical rather than behavioural (see Alam & Imran 2014: 357) – without access, women lack the digital skills required. However, if they fail to apply for benefits, they can face poverty and homelessness.

In this chapter and the following one, I shall therefore examine how my interlocutors face these vulnerabilities, considering how they 'keep going' and navigate the complexities of this challenging settlement phase as they transition toward independent living in the United Kingdom.

I shall consider three broad sets of challenges. The first is the challenge of avoiding poverty and homelessness, which requires the women to immediately register for benefits and apply for council housing during the twenty-eight-day 'moving-on' period. The second challenge for these women is settling into life as single women without any family nearby by learning how to manage their personal banking, set up online payments, manage digital services and email correspondences, among other things. The third challenge, as benefits recipients, is navigating the welfare-to-work transitions mandated by Universal Credit (UC), the UK benefits system. I shall address the first two challenges in this chapter, while in Chapter Six I shall consider how these women navigate the Jobcentre Plus welfare-to-work mandate. Chapters Five and Six describe the initial settlement phase. Although these women want to achieve independence and develop the necessary skills to navigate life effectively, it proves challenging during these early days and is something that they accomplish gradually over time.

My interlocutors faced UC, the new working-age benefits system implemented as a key part of the UK Government's austerity measures aimed at reducing public spending, driven by the 2007–8 financial crisis (Jensen 2013). Although the crisis shifted from the private sector (affecting banking and financial centres in the United States and United Kingdom) to the global scale, in the United Kingdom it became a fiscal crisis focused on government debt. Some have argued that austerity is part of a longer neoliberal trajectory, however (Clarke & Newman 2012). Anthropologists have also pointed out that austerity-driven policies disrupt social infrastructure, leading to underfunded and overstretched institutions. Policies shift the responsibility away from the state and onto individuals, civil society, and informal networks (Bear 2015; Fassin 2013; Ferguson 1994; Koch 2018; Muehlebach 2012). Although the exact structure and history of each geographical location is unique, there are similarities in the public experience, government policy, and the role of the state in social mechanisms. In the United Kingdom, the 2010 election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government saw the introduction of a 'new era of austerity' (Koch 2017). Masquerading as market-based restructuring, the funding cuts introduced have drastically affected the provision of advice to welfare dependents (Forbess & James 2017: 1465), with austerity increasing the need for advisers and frontline workers while simultaneously rendering their work even more complicated and challenging (Forbess & James 2014). After the election of the Conservative-dominated coalition government in 2010, austerity politics and public sector cuts also led to 'austerity localism', where resources and funding are limited or cut and not everyone has access to frontline support (Koch 2021). This was the environment my interlocutors faced during their early settlement phase.

Currently, research on the role of frontline works covers brokers, intermediaries, and case workers with specific expertise (Bailie 2010; Koch 2021; Koch & James 2022; Mervyn & Allen 2012: 1133; Tuckett 2018; Yarris 2021); advisers, mentors, and consultants (Arambewela-Colley 2021; Björkman 2021: 3; Chandra 2021: 101-6; James 2011: 335); and 'digital carers' or information intermediaries tasked with providing digital assistance (Harvey, Hastings & Chowdhury 2021; Mervyn & Allen 2012) – that is, individuals formally positioned to help refugees, migrants, and members of the public manage their bureaucratic and digital needs. Such assistants may be non-expert volunteers, who are the first port of call for clients in need of assistance. These generalists refer clients with more complex issues to a second or third tier of advice (Forbess & James 2014: 76). Some workers learn on the job. For example, in Tawfic's study of homelessness in England, his interlocutor Lily worked in the homeless sector but had no legal qualifications or prior legal experience, even though such roles often involve the need to interpret legal documents on a regular basis (Tawfic 2022: 84-5). Such workers can also be volunteers with no industry experience, who receive an induction and some informal training (Tawfic 2022: 110). On the other hand, they may be local activists or 'community champions' acting on their own initiative to represent their local community (Koch 2018: 163-87), as well as university students, faith leaders, local people with skills to offer, such as cooking (Grill 2023), or those with a desire to help newcomers settle (Hernández-Carretero 2023). These workers operate through formal designated positions and often in assigned spaces.

However, owing to the effects of austerity, which has led to insufficient service provision, as well as the language barriers these women face, their low confidence, expensive travel costs, and a general lack of awareness of the services, Irum, Shazia, Bilquis, and Farah are all forced to seek support informally through 'informal go-betweens'. These are non-expert individuals who have not been formally appointed to carry out this role and do not work from a designated space. They are called on to provide assistance on an ad hoc basis by those, like the women in my study, who frequently encounter bureaucratic and digital challenges that they cannot manage alone. Unlike the social actors in the studies mentioned above, these individuals did not volunteer for or sign up to formally work in this role. These 'informal go-betweens', for example, teachers, friends, office workers, housemates, and fellow students, are called upon to provide non-formal, ad hoc assistance through face-to-face interactions, paper and digital communications, phone calls, and online tasks performed in non-designated spaces. This assistance is characterized by distinctive interactional dynamics, is not operationalized under an organizational structure or monitored, and can present both risks and rewards, leading to diverse outcomes.

In this chapter, I shall contend, first, that 'informal go-betweens' play a key role in the settlement phase, having the potential to either foster or undermine independence and confidence among those they assist. Second, I shall argue that 'informal go-betweens' are an inevitable consequence of the austerity-driven, inadequate provision of frontline support in a highly digitalized and bureaucratized state and society. This chapter aims to advance scholarly discussions on how refugees, migrants, and people in need of assistance receive support in the face of bureaucratic and digital challenges.

In the following sections, I shall first set out three features that shaped my fieldwork, before proceeding to review the frontline support provisions and current austerity situation in the United

Kingdom. Thereafter, I shall provide a conceptual exploration of the 'go-betweenage' I have observed, describing its characteristics and functions in my interlocutors' bureaucratic and digital challenges. After this, I shall use Irum's and Shazia's case studies to illustrate that, notwithstanding the assistance offered by designated frontline workers, brokers, or intermediaries, 'informal go-betweens' play a critical role in avoiding homelessness and poverty. Next, I shall use Farah's and Irum's case studies to illustrate the challenges and risks of this 'informal go-betweenage'. Thereafter, through a description of the experiences of Irum, Shazia and Bilquis, I shall demonstrate how such 'informal go-betweens' help with banking and travel issues, as an essential step toward independent living. Consequently, the case studies presented in this section highlight how, for these women, accomplishing tasks with the help of 'informal go-betweens' helps them to build their confidence and independence.

Thereafter, I shall turn to the digital challenges faced by my interlocutors, particularly in relation to the digital issues Shazia experiences during the 'moving-on' phase. Next, to contextualize my interlocutors' problems, I shall detail how the UK Government's e-services are underutilized at the local council level by the digitally challenged and explain the extent of the digital inequalities at play. After that, I shall refer to some relevant scholarly studies on the current provision of digital assistance, before exploring how my interlocutors struggle with e-government services and the assistance they solicit from 'informal go-betweens', which presents both risks and rewards.

Three key factors underpin my fieldwork observations. First, my studies in refugee care before commencing this research project, coupled with the community-level support offered by the Muslim community to which I belong, shaped my approach. This support, extended to newly arrived Afghan and Syrian members in the United Kingdom and Germany, is rooted in an ethics of care based on Islam's ethical goal of enabling each individual to live to their best potential.[36] During my work in the community, I have observed how newly arrived members of the community, like the women in my research, initially struggle and require support to help them settle into independent living. I have seen that, until they have developed the language skills and local know-how needed to help them settle into Western living, members of the community with little or no education require additional support. Through an ethics of care and compassion, community volunteers assist newly arrived members of the community with complex settlement challenges to help support their well-being and quality of life.

The second factor is my role as a caring-cum-observant anthropologist. As mentioned in the introduction, my approach aligns with Saxton's (2021) and Yarris's (2021) notion of 'accompaniment'. It is rooted in the ethics of care that Saxton (2021) provides to her interlocutor, Aniceta, an indigenous Mexican migrant labourer in California's strawberry industry who suffers from several health issues. During her accompaniment practices, Saxton (2021) accompanied Aniceta to medical appointments, translated and interpreted legal and medical documents, and provided her with emotional support. During this accompaniment, her ethics of care often led individuals to mistake her for a social worker. Through the fieldwork method she employs, she

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[36] See https://www.iis.ac.uk/scholarly-contributions/aga-khan-development-network-akdn-an-ethical-framework/.(Accessed 15 March 2024) Islam's ethical ideal centres on enabling each individual to live up to their exalted status as a vicegerent of God on earth, in whom God has breathed His own spirit and to whom He has made whatever is in the heavens and the earth an object of trust and quest.

illustrates the injustices and disadvantages faced by workers in the strawberry industry, which range from harsh working conditions to exposure to pesticides. The third key factor is my personal experiences as a young bride with no family in the United Kingdom, during which time those around me made little effort to understand the challenges I faced. Now, friends and relatives say that they recognized the issues I was dealing with at the time but did not or could not interfere. Contrary to this attitude, I always do my utmost to work alongside people in navigating their challenges, so that they are not alone.[37]

Applying my counselling skills, I remained an empathetic, active listener throughout my fieldwork, seeking to provide my interlocutors with a non-judgemental space in which to process their challenges and feelings. On the strength of my life-coaching skills, I supported their desire to live independently in the United Kingdom. I maintained a gentle, goal-oriented approach to their settlement processes. As well as meeting simply to 'hang out', we planned our meetings around tasks related to their settlement; I either offered to help or they solicited my support. I witnessed and participated in the challenges they faced in transitioning to independent living. As explained in the introduction, accompaniment, as an ethics of care, is a method practised by researchers in medical, immigration, and abolition ecology research (Mei-Singh 2019; Yarris 2021; see also Block & Griffin 2013 in discussion with Farmer & Gutiérrez about its efficacy in medical care) in response to dehumanizing practices, medical service shortcomings, immigration policies, or eco-social harm. Similarly, throughout my fieldwork, I was always ready to assist, and this practice of accompaniment allowed me to engage in a deeper examination of my interlocutors' lived experiences during this phase.

Next, I shall examine some academic discourses on formally appointed brokers and intermediaries, particularly in relation to my interlocutors' demographic group and austerity within the UK context.

Formally appointed Brokes and Intermediaries – Scholarly Works on Designated Assistance with Settlement

In austerity-era Europe, the growing mix of informal, hybrid, and complex welfare, care, and advice services has led to changes in the function of state bureaucracy, making it more difficult to access available support and increasing the demand for advice services and grassroots mutual aid to fill the gaps or even replace state assistance (James & Koch 2020). The needy and vulnerable rely on formally designated frontline brokers/advisers to access public goods or mediate between themselves and the source of those goods. They also advocate for broader redistributive struggles over housing, immigration policies, and access to welfare provisions (Koch & James 2022).

In a study of the settlement experiences of thirty Sudanese refugees in Omaha, USA, Bailie (2010) studies the role of 'ethnic cultural brokers'. In this context, Bailie (2010: 133) describes Doap, a migrant trusted by the community, as an 'ethnic cultural broker' of Sudanese heritage. Newly arrived Sudanese migrants find they can relate to him because he understands their language,

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[37] The forms and context of *seva* in which I choose to engage are shaped by the challenges I have faced in my life.

background, history, and the challenges and barriers they face, providing them with assistance in accessing resettlement services (Bailie 2010: 3). Such brokers are well-reputed for their expertise, knowledge, and service, acting as a link between service organizations and their refugee clients. Thanks to their reputation and skills, newly arrived migrants seek them out for assistance. Bailie argues that, because they are a gateway to accessing services and understanding bureaucratic systems and housing, social, health, legal, education, transportation, and general information, these brokers are crucial for successful settlement (Bailie 2010: 10). They also provide a link or point of mediation between groups or persons of different cultural backgrounds (Bailie 2010: 139). Over time, they develop knowledge and capacities in a particular area of expertise, helping to reduce struggles or bring about change (Jezewski 1990). Although personal character and trust are important, people generally prefer interpreters from their own informal networks (Edwards, Temple & Alexander 2005). None of my interlocutors had access to an 'ethnic cultural broker' or a community network that they trusted. They also feared the shame, gossip, and stigma that would ensue if they contacted members of their own community.

Studies have also explored the importance of immigration brokers who volunteer or work in non-profit agencies,[38] from whom refugees seek assistance with complicated administrative processes within increasingly bureaucratic immigration regimes (Tuckett 2018). The brokers in Tuckett's (2018) research either volunteered or were employed in official spaces, such as non-profit organizations. These are self-styled immigration brokers with experience, knowledge, and language skills acquired over time. In some cases, such brokers experience a tension between their client's requirements and the need to implement the bureaucratic processes for which they are employed (Walther 2021). Research also describes advisers who provide advice and assistance to correct mistakes made by state agents or face challenging local authorities, immigration, landlords, banks, and debt collection agencies. The advice and support that such workers provide are shaped by their moral and social justice views (Koch 2021; Koch & James 2022). In Bilquis' and Shazia's cases, although they initially received help from their local refugee centre, they faced several challenges after moving on from the centre's services (as illustrated both in this chapter and the following one).

Scholarly works also consider the role of brokers who develop expertise in specific areas thanks to their personal and professional experiences. Such experiences include migrating and learning (Bailie 2010: 194); navigating the complexities of the institutional and material aspects of a city (see the study by Björkman 2021: 3 on brokers in Bombay city); adopting the role of caregiver when travelling with workers to large metropolitan cities to help them find work and establish professional relationships over time (Sturman & Chandra 2021: 101-6); in healthcare systems, where community support officers mediate between local ideas around personal health and global mental health frameworks (Arambewela-Colley 2021); or gaining expertise through employment (Björkman & Truelove 2021: 124-5). Brokers can evolve to some extent in response to local demands and can be opportunistic and morally ambiguous (James 2011: 335). Others may take on this role for the purpose of social mobility, as a result of their desire for self-improvement and their dissatisfaction with the system (Tuckett 2018), or to acquire prestige or a position of power

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[38] Before commencing this Ph.D., I volunteered in an organization where asylum seekers receive support in areas such as accommodation, immigration, and mental health.

within and beyond their communities (Knodel 2021). Many also take on such roles because of their aspirations of being 'good people' or to help their clients enjoy a more expansive notion of the good life (Gill 2023; Hernández-Carretero 2023; Tawfic 2022).

Moreover, as Koch and James (2022: 4) point out, the post-war shift and reconfiguration of austerity/fiscal policies have resulted in a shift in social settlements, giving rise to hybrid and plural arrangements between the market, third sector, and government institutions. Koch (2021) argues that, in the context of the ongoing 'austerity localism' at work in Britain, there has been a more pronounced shift towards minimal welfare protection. This gives rise to dissatisfaction (Koch 2017), a victim-blaming culture driven by government narratives of individual responsibility, and a sense of distrust (Koch 2018). Following the 2010 election of the Conservative-dominated coalition government, austerity politics and public sector cuts became the dominant attitudes. Furthermore, the reconfiguration of market/state/third-sector relations is complex, requiring the intervention of 'experts': that is, advisers who mediate and translate between different institutions and actors, including the most marginalized citizens and complex bureaucracies (Forbess & James 2014). Studies of frontline workers have also indicated that working within the impoverished welfare state is as much about moral endeavours as it is about political and economic imperatives, both for frontline workers (Koch 2021; Koch & James 2022) and for recipients (see Koch 2018).

Considering these moral endeavours, Koch (2021) examines the role of frontline workers in local authorities, third-sector bodies, and community organizations. Koch (2021) observes that frontline workers decide how to allocate support to moral decisions based on their judgements of the 'deservingness' and the behaviours of service users, who are termed customers in the case of UC or clients at advice centres. Koch (2021) argues that, in the context of 'austerity localism', where resources and funding are either limited or cut, it is not possible to help everyone. This gives rise to a tension around who can be helped, and frontline workers invoke hierarchies of well-behaved 'model clients' to help them. Koch (2021: 245) argues that such tensions are the 'surface-level expressions of a deeper struggle over the meaning and possibilities of citizenship in Britain today'. Not only are frontline workers forced to engage in a moral judgement of recipients' 'deservingness' (Koch 2021), but they must also often balance or challenge systems of exploitation and inequality (Forbess & James 2014; Koch & James 2022). As Koch and James (2022) point out, frontline workers sometimes position themselves as allies or representatives of more powerful institutions, including those of the state. At other times, however, they challenge and engage in more overtly hostile relationships with those institutions. Frontline workers, like brokers and intermediaries within these sectors, are paid and operate from designated spaces such as local council offices, NGOs, or private enterprises with limited capacities.

Extending the Discourse: Examining the Concept of 'Go-betweenage'

In the face of these service inadequacies, I observed the use of the practice of 'go-betweenage' among my interlocutors. The challenges they faced include an absence of support during critical time-sensitive moments, inadequate service quality, and obstacles related to language, digitalization, and travel costs when seeking advice. To fill these service gaps and meet their immediate needs, my interlocutors sought informal and ad hoc assistance from non-expert

individuals from diverse social backgrounds to navigate bureaucratic processes. I term these individuals – who informally facilitate, communicate, assist, or transact both between people and between people and structures – 'informal go-betweens'. Often, these individuals help to bridge language barriers and a lack of digital, technical, and general know-how. Crucially, they help navigate complex systems or bureaucratic processes. As discussed below, depending on their honesty and individual competencies, their involvement can introduce both rewards and risks. It is important to examine the role of these interactions as they take place outside of institutional structures. Moreover, even if at times they may appear to resemble their more 'official' counterparts in some ways, as they are more informal and 'personal' in nature they are also more open to discretion, variability, and capriciousness. Such support remains underexplored in scholarly debates.

'Informal Go-betweenage'

As I shall illustrate through the case studies examined here, I witnessed women solicit help from 'informal go-betweens', which included friends, acquaintances, researchers, strangers, professionals, housemates, classmates, and work colleagues; that is, anyone willing to assist them in their time of need. They called upon these 'informal go-betweens' to navigate issues relating to English classes, finding a doctor's surgery, using the local library, reading prescriptions, utility bills, and medical letters, completing paper and online forms and correspondence, and helping with divorce applications. Non-digital support, where these women could physically contribute, observe gestures and behaviours, and listen to conversations, facilitated their understanding of the situation and learning. Consequently, 'informal go-betweenage' often reduces the likelihood of negative consequences and encourages learning, confidence, and independence.

The women I studied also turned to 'informal go-betweens' for digital support, such as applying for benefits and housing, managing online payments, or corresponding with Jobcentre Plus work coaches. Here, the risk of negative outcomes is higher. Lacking the necessary language and digital skills, they had no choice but to place their trust in an informal go-between' to manage their digital processes. They were obliged to share sensitive information, for example, their birth, passport, bank and password details, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Often, 'informal go-betweens' lack bureaucratic knowledge and the ability to navigate digital platforms effectively. Notwithstanding these challenges, my interlocutors had little choice. They turned to 'informal go-betweens' to meet their immediate needs, especially time-sensitive digital tasks required for essential issues such as benefits and housing, as well as to avoid homelessness, destitution, benefit payments, suspensions, or penalties for delayed online payments.

'Informal Go-betweens': Supporting Initial Settlement Challenges

In this section, I shall illustrate that even if the women studied here received support from designated 'intermediaries' at their refuge or from a frontline professional, they still required ongoing help with navigating the complicated bureaucratic terrain. They therefore turned to 'informal go-betweens', such as a flatmate, a kind person in a solicitor's office, a friend, a classmate,

a professional, or a researcher, like me. These individuals are neither experts in the field nor designated professionals or positioned in allocated spaces.

To explain the role of such individuals in avoiding homelessness and poverty, I shall begin by exploring Irum's and Shazia's cases. After that, through a consideration of Farah's and Irum's divorce challenges, I shall explain the ambiguity of 'informal go-betweenage' when the 'informal go-between' relied upon lacks expert knowledge. Next, by referring to the banking issues faced by Irum, Shazia, and Bilquis, I shall illustrate how 'informal go-betweenage' aids learning and promotes confidence.

'Informal go-betweens' providing support during the early settlement phase: Housing issues

First, using Irum's and Shazia's case studies, I shall illustrate the insufficiency of their support workers' assistance when navigating housing issues and how help from 'informal go-betweens' enabled both women to secure and settle into a place to live.

Irum was allocated a support worker from a national trafficking NGO because her trafficking case was undecided by the authorities. This support continued after she was granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom.[39] Irum met her support worker, a middle-aged woman of African descent, in a coffee shop approximately every 3 weeks. I attended many of these meetings with her. During the meetings, I noticed that Irum never spoke openly, nor did she solicit help with her divorce or the toxic dynamic with Aisha. When I asked Irum about this, she explained that she found speaking in English difficult. Irum also felt uncomfortable sharing her private issues with her support worker. Unlike Bailie's (2010) study, in which immigrants were comfortable with their ethnic cultural broker's ability to understand and help them, Irum explained that she was unsure whether or not her support worker would understand her predicaments and be able to assist. As a young migrant, I was always uncertain whom I could trust and who would understand my issues. Mostly, I kept things to myself. However, unlike my situation, Irum's designated support worker did not belong to her community, and Irum could use her support without fear of gossip.

On the other hand, Irum's case resonates with White, Bell, Reid & Dyson's (2022: 5110) study of the 'social prescribing' practice (referring people to a range of local non-clinical services) employed in social work in the United Kingdom. This study underscored clients' need to feel understood and supported, stressing that the support of link workers (such as support workers) needed to be more 'in-depth' in its approach, supported by the skills to recognize the client's struggles. The study indicates that such workers need to 'dig deep' or 'unpick' clients' issues and get to the root of the problem through skilful questioning and listening, building an effective and supportive client relationship. Irum and her support worker may have had difficulties forging such a relationship. It was unclear whether this was because Irum needed to be more forthcoming or whether the support worker needed to ask more incisive questions, or if the dynamic reflected some typical issues with such relationships.

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[39] It was never clear to Irum and Shazia what help they could seek from their support worker. However, it appeared to me that both women could ask for advice or assistance on most matters.

After a lot of gentle coaxing from me, Irum explained her issues with Aisha and her in-laws and asked her support worker for help with finding alternative accommodation. The support worker accompanied Irum to the local council's homeless unit and helped her register for housing. However, because she met Irum only every 3 weeks, she was unavailable to assist Irum with any follow-up housing issues. As a result, when the homeless unit sent Irum information about available properties to view and move into, Irum was unaware that they had done so. One day, by chance, Aisha logged into her email account and found the housing unit's communications. As Lloyd *et al.* (2013: 122) explain, refugees struggle with information production, reproduction, circulation, and access.

Irum needed assistance with travelling to and viewing the accommodation offered by the homeless unit. As Aisha could not accompany her, she asked me. I was not an expert on homeless housing facilities and regulations, and I had no experience with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). However, I did have some idea of how HMOs worked, having visited Bilquis, who lived in one, before beginning my fieldwork. I knew that Irum could not read the instructions, travel alone to different properties, or communicate with the property manager during her visits. Moreover, Irum struggled to travel alone with Aisha's baby, whom she took everywhere with her. As I could see that Irum needed help, I accompanied her. Irum was very unhappy with the mixed-gender accommodation offered by the YMCA. Consequently, the council offered her a room in a female-only HMO. Irum went to view it with me and later with Aisha, before accepting the offer. I managed Irum's communications with the local authority and attended all the meetings before her move. On the move-in day, I helped Irum understand the tenancy and house rules, fire safety regulations, restrictions on who can enter the property, the number to call in case of problems, her utility bills, service charges, and council tax payments, among other things. Irum acknowledged how critical my assistance was during this phase.

Next, I shall turn to Shazia's case to illustrate how, with the help of an 'informal go-between', she avoided homelessness at the end of her 'moving-on' phase.

Eviction challenges

Shazia was also allocated a support worker from a local NGO, whom she met sporadically. From what I understood from Shazia, as her case worker had other work responsibilities, this was the extent of the support made available to her.[40] During this phase, the support worker would speak to Shazia over the phone and accompanied her on one occasion to the local council homeless office to register her for housing. The support worker was not available to provide hands-on support, however. For example, the day before eviction day, at the end of her 'move-on period', Shazia had no idea where she was going to live. She had received no communications about her accommodation from the council's homeless unit. She was petrified by the idea of becoming homeless. When I visited her, she requested that I check online for any information to help address her situation. Unable to find anything, I phoned the homeless unit, but they did not offer any definitive answers. Feeling scared and uncertain about what might happen, Shazia asked me to

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[40] In Irum's case, her support worker met with her every 3 weeks, in line with the level of support offered to her.

accompany her to the local homeless office to seek some clarification. I knew that Bilquis had been homeless for 6 weeks. During this time, she had spent some nights sleeping in homeless shelters and her days on the streets. It was only after a local refugee centre fought her case (based on her poor mental health) with her borough's homeless unit that her local authority provided her with housing. I feared the same would be the case for Shazia. We spent the entire day waiting at the homeless office. During that time, we spoke to two officers, but they did not offer us any housing. Finally, they asked us to return the following day, which we did, armed with a letter from Shazia's GP explaining her poor mental health and a recommendation that she be allocated a room in a female-only HMO.

We waited for almost 5 hours that day. Finally, in the late afternoon, Shazia was offered a tiny room in a mixed-gender YMCA with shared bathrooms and no cooking or clothes-washing facilities. Shazia was very upset with the offer. Given her history of abuse, I asked her if she would like me to insist that they find better accommodation. She nodded gratefully. Although I explained her history, the council refused. Instead, they said that if Shazia did not take this offer, she would be homeless. Moreover, they explained to us that if she turned down an offer of accommodation, the homeless unit would not be responsible for her housing. In the face of such harsh rules, Shazia had no choice but to accept. We left with the YMCA address in hand. I used Google Maps to find it. There, Shazia was handed several forms to sign. As no one explained the documents to Shazia, I tried to do so. However, Shazia was very stressed and upset. With a look that said, 'I can't do this anymore', she whispered, 'I can't think'. In her tired, stressed state, Shazia signed the papers to move into her room without understanding what she was signing. Shazia experienced a sense of information overload (Lloyd *et al.* 2013: 123) and felt pressured to sign to have somewhere to live. These two cases illustrate Aisha's and my role as 'informal go-betweens' in helping Irum and Shazia avoid homelessness.

I shall now turn to Farah's and Irum's cases to illustrate the role of 'informal go-betweenage' in navigating personal issues such as divorce. Their experiences demonstrate how an 'informal go-between' manages poor knowledge competencies, highlighting the possible risks if errors are made – knowingly or unknowingly – owing to poorly informed 'informal go-betweens'. I shall begin with Farah's case.

Divorce issues

After her English lesson one afternoon, Farah said she was feeling stressed because the divorce documents her lawyer-cum-landlord had sent were difficult to understand. Farah explained that her lawyer had forwarded the forms to her on her phone. He received them from her husband, who knew the lawyer because he had applied for Farah's non-molestation order. Although Farah had asked the lawyer for more clarity on how to respond (her housemate helped her type the text message), he had not replied. After that, Farah's flatmate said she was too busy to assist her. Farah asked if I could help her understand the divorce documents. I explained that I had never read a divorce application or divorce-related correspondence, and that I found the legal language difficult to understand. I said that I was also worried about giving her incorrect advice. However, I assured her that I would do my best to help. Farah suggested seeking legal advice, proposing that we go to a legal aid lawyer's office that she had seen while she was shopping. Feeling relieved, I agreed to

go to the lawyer's office because we would be given proper guidance and accurate information, releasing me of the responsibility of deciphering the document. Farah knew which bus to take to get there.

Once we arrived, I spoke to the receptionist on Farah's behalf. She advised us that the law firm did not offer legal aid. Farah may have missed this as a result of her limited language skills. They directed us to another law firm that did offer it. However, the next lawyer's office advised us they had stopped their legal aid service. We quickly realized it was going to prove difficult to find a firm offering legal aid and Farah was understandably disappointed. At a loss, I pleaded for someone to review and explain Farah's document. Fortunately, a lady at the other end of the room asked what we needed. Feeling very relieved, I explained the issue. After examining our paper, she said that Farah did not require legal aid because her husband had paid for and applied for a divorce. However, the papers were incomplete. She recommended that we call the Family Courts and request that they resend the incorrectly served papers for Farah's signature. Farah was surprised to learn that her husband had paid for the divorce and grateful that she would not need to incur costs she could not afford.

Farah suggested that we return to her flat. She offered me a cup of tea and some snacks she had prepared. Once we had settled down with our drinks, Farah wanted me to call the court for her. I searched for their number online, called them, and explained Farah's situation. They agreed to resend the papers to the lawyer named on the form for Farah to sign and return. Farah asked me to type a text message to her solicitor asking him to inform her when the papers were ready to sign. It seemed that her lawyer had either received incomplete papers or had not sent all the documents to Farah, causing her stress. She navigated this confusing bureaucratic divorce process by relying on 'informal go-betweens' like myself, the kind woman at the solicitor's firm, and her flatmate. I wondered how someone in my role as an 'informal go-between', ill-equipped when it came to divorce matters, might have assisted Farah – would they have offered her inaccurate information and released themselves from the role or spent time ensuring she received the appropriate help?

I shall now turn to Irum's case to illustrate how 'informal go-betweens' collaborate to overcome a lack of specialist knowledge in the area concerned.

Aisha was very keen for Irum's divorce to go through because, as I have explained, Aisha planned for Irum to marry her brother in Pakistan and thereby facilitate his migration, as I discovered after Aisha and Irum's fallout. Immediately after Irum came to live with her, she registered for Irum's *khula* (Islamic divorce) application to expedite the process. She applied to a local Muslim charity to pay the *khula* fees. However, getting a divorce entails filling out forms, travelling to the Sharia Council, managing email correspondence, and gathering all the necessary documents; all things that Irum could not manage independently. As Aisha worked every day and could therefore not assist, Irum asked for my help. I agreed and accompanied Irum to the Sharia Council to complete her *khula* registration. Irum and I were unsure whether or not to disclose Irum's gold necklace, which was a personal gift from her mother. Irum feared the repercussions if her in-laws found out about it. She looked to me for advice. I was unwilling to offer her poorly informed advice. I looked at Irum helplessly and simply said I did not know. Irum and I decided to call Aisha to seek her

advice. I also helped Irum find a family law practice to help with her civil divorce. We travelled to her first appointment together, but unfortunately Irum could not afford the lawyer's fees. She also did not have her original marriage certificate, which is essential for the application process.

These case studies illustrate that, without the help of supportive 'informal go-betweens', Farah and Irum would have struggled with their divorces. They also demonstrate my struggles in acting as an 'informal go-between' owing to my inadequate experience in divorce matters and fear of making mistakes. I overcame these impediments by collaborating with experts and Aisha, but other 'informal go-betweens' might have taken different approaches.

I shall now turn to these women's everyday struggles with private banking, illustrating how, with the assistance of an 'informal go-between', they managed to familiarize themselves with and become proficient in managing these services.

Banking services

Some studies explore the role of people who assist women in women's refuges in the capacity of 'refuge intermediaries' (Mervyn & Allen 2012: 1133). Such individuals help refuge residents access e-information and services pertinent to their needs and transition to independent living. In my study, staff at the women's refuge helped Irum and Shazia set up their bank accounts, bank cards, and pin numbers. While such support is of course helpful, as I shall explain next, based on Irum's and Shazia's cases, women need more support to build their capacity to manage banking activities independently.

At first, after Irum and Shazia left their women's refuge, neither of them had a smartphone. Irum would regularly ask Aisha or me to check if her benefits money had arrived in her bank account. When she asked me, I hesitated to log into her account and be privy to her private banking information (which Aisha did). I suggested that I show her how to check her balance at the nearest cash machine. Unfortunately, Irum could not read the instructions on the cash machine or the words on her bank balance printout. I explained what the printout said. However, I could see that Irum did not fully understand. Similarly, after applying for benefits, Shazia asked me to accompany her to the bank and show her how to access her bank statement and monitor her benefits payments. Nevertheless, they learnt to manage their banking activities after getting their first (second-hand) smartphones and practising with the help of others.

Bilquis, on the other hand, had been living in the United Kingdom for some time and was well-versed in banking processes. However, when she wanted to challenge an error in her bank account to avoid losing money, she said that she did not feel confident enough to explain her situation via email. She could not manage the ongoing email correspondence required with her bank manager to resolve the issue. She asked a friend who was fluent in English from the charity where she worked to help her, but she was unavailable. Bilquis decided to go to the bank and have a face-to-face conversation and asked me to accompany her. By that point, I knew that Bilquis could communicate in English, so I encouraged her to go alone. To persuade her, I said I was very confident that she would be able to manage independently. Bilquis refused, saying, *'Mai akela nahe ja sakti, app aai aur unko batai bank statement mi paise ka masla kay hai'* ('I cannot go alone; you come

and explain what the issue is in the bank statement with the money'). Bilquis explained that she could not speak English fluently enough to describe her situation and felt that she would find it hard to understand and respond to the conversation with her bank manager. She also said that she struggled to understand English accents. I therefore accompanied Bilquis to the bank. I stayed in the background and said very little. Bilquis held the entire conversation herself, with a few prompts from me, convinced the manager of the mistake, and recovered her lost money. She left the bank overjoyed and brimming with confidence.

Next, I shall discuss the travel issues experienced by Bilquis and Irum, who, in the early days, found it hard to find their way as they could not read Google Maps and could not afford expensive travel costs.

Travel issues

On one trip to the Jobcentre, Irum forgot the bus routes that Aisha had explained to her. Unable to read directions, she felt lost and anxious and decided to return home. After we met, I often assisted Irum in the early days by paying for her bus ticket. I always showed her the way. I frequently put her on the right bus to get her home. When she wanted to visit Shazia, who lived in another city, for the first time, Irum asked me to book her online ticket and explain the bus route to her. Irum called me twice to reconfirm the directions I had given her. Now, she books her tickets herself and travels to visit her friend in another city.

Bilquis also explained that, at first, she found the tube systems confusing because the trains travel in opposite directions. Although she asked people at the station, she would often get lost. I understood her challenges because when Farah and I travelled on the tube, with me navigating, she mentioned that she never took the tube because she found it expensive and confusing. I found this unusual, but one day, a Spanish-speaking lady stopped me on the tube, looking very confused; she showed me an address and asked which direction of tube travel she should take. I realized that what might be easy for many can be confusing for others at first. Notwithstanding these initial issues, all my interlocutors can now travel independently using Google Maps. Discussing the case of Halima – a recent migrant to Melbourne, Australia – Lems (2018) explains that at first, she found the city incomprehensible. Her sister, who had lived there for 10 years, remained by her side throughout that period. Halima explained that surviving her first month would have been difficult without her sister's support. My interlocutors often turned to 'informal go-betweens' to navigate their tough settlement challenges, illustrating how supportive 'informal go-betweenage' provides a means to independent living.

These cases illuminate the initial struggles such women navigate on a daily basis – challenges that may seem mundane to most, such as travelling, interpreting, registering, banking, filling out forms, and other social and bureaucratic issues. In those early days, with support from formally designated people proving insufficient, the women in my studies turn to 'informal go-betweens' as a means of transitioning to independent living. The outcomes of this 'informal go-betweenage' are unpredictable. In the cases discussed here, however, it reduces the likelihood of being cheated. The women studied here were able to understand their situation by watching interactions, using gestures and behaviours, and developing their language skills. As Lloyd *et al.* (2013: 122-3) explain,

to compensate for the disconnect they experience with information, refugees focus on oral and visual sources rather than written materials to access information. In such encounters, my interlocutors could effectively manage their support and learn to do things themselves. For them, physically accomplishing tasks with the help of 'informal go-betweens' sows the seeds of confidence and independence. For example, some of the women settled into life on benefits and council accommodation and, once their English improved, their confidence grew. They purchased smartphones and learnt to use online banking, social media, and Google Maps. Over time, they made friends and built social networks. Farah and Bilquis have remarried. Irum and Shazia can now manage most things, with some help from refuge staff or Citizens Advice.

Next, beginning with Shazia's experiences, I shall examine how my interlocutors relied on 'informal go-betweens' to tackle their ongoing digital challenges during the 'move-on period' and early settlement phase.

Navigating Digital Inequalities: The Role of 'Informal Go-betweens'

Four months into fieldwork, Shazia was granted asylum in the United Kingdom on the grounds of having been trafficked by her family. Although I found it heartbreaking to hear this, I was overjoyed about her refugee status and that she had been granted legal rights to remain in the United Kingdom. After congratulating her, my excitement quickly waned when I asked her if she had begun her online benefits application. Shazia said she had not. I explained the extensive, complicated online form that she needed to complete to avoid delays or rejection. After my experience with Irum's benefits application, I knew that benefits payments took at least 5 weeks to begin. Shazia's £37 weekly stipend from the UK Home Office could stop before her benefits payment commenced, rendering her homeless and destitute. I asked Shazia if she had any savings. In a low voice, she said, 'No, *Baji*'. My heart went out to her. I realized that my question was a mistake – it was not possible to have savings without permission to enter paid employment and a weekly stipend of £37. I made a note to myself to be more careful.

I asked if she had received notice to vacate her room. Shazia had no idea, so I suggested that she find out. Shazia asked her HMO manager, but he said he could not help. Then, Shazia reached out to her support worker, who called the Home Office. They confirmed that Shazia needed to vacate her room and reposted her eviction letter, which she said she had never received. She was horrified that the Home Office had stipulated that she must leave her accommodation within 4 weeks of receiving her refugee status. When the letter reached Shazia, she realized her eviction was just 2 weeks away. It dawned on her that although she had received her much-awaited legal rights to remain in the United Kingdom, she could imminently become homeless and destitute. A few days later, Shazia called me. In a tearful tone, she said, '*Baji,* I am so stressed, I can't concentrate, *muji kuch samaj hani aata*' ('I don't understand anything'). I sensed that Shazia was overwhelmed. She did not know what would happen and felt 'stuck'.

I visited Shazia the following day. She seemed anxious and worried. I hugged her and held her as her eyes welled up with tears. I said, 'Let's make a cup of tea and share the fresh pastries I have brought'. Although tea can be a good antidote in most situations, I sensed it would not help that

day. I asked Shazia how she was feeling. She said she was experiencing negative thoughts. Gently, referring to her overdosing attempts during painful, difficult moments, I said, 'What about those things'. Shazia replied, 'No'. She went on to explain that she was sleeping poorly. During the night, she often felt cold, and at other times, she sweated. She often felt breathless and would sit in the communal kitchen to calm herself down. These symptoms were indicative of her poor mental health.

With tears in her eyes, Shazia explained that she had panicked after our telephone call and after receiving the letter from the Home Office. She went to a local refugee charity to seek help. They advised her to go to her local Jobcentre. Shazia did not feel confident going alone and asked a friend to accompany her. Both women spoke little English. They were unable to complete the long, complicated online form. Finally, they asked another client in the waiting area for assistance. At that point, a staff member (not responsible for completing forms for clients) interjected to help them. Shazia explained that she was apprehensive about whether she had completed her application accurately. Like many others in my study, Shazia felt overwhelmed by the bureaucratic e-services. She was petrified of facing destitution if her benefits claim was rejected or delayed.

Shazia explained that her English teacher set up an email account for her and knew Shazia's email address and password. To log in to her Jobcentre Plus account and communicate with her Jobcentre work coach to avoid her benefits being suspended, Shazia also shared her Jobcentre login details with her English teacher. Shazia's teacher explained the login procedure to her, but she found it too complicated to follow. Owing to her poor mental health and the expensive bus journey, Shazia struggled to visit the library on a regular basis and use public computers for her online needs. Shazia showed me her Nokia phone and said frustratedly, '*Baji,* I cannot afford a smartphone, nor can I afford the regular travel costs to the library. I find it hard to comply with my Jobcentre commitments'. That day, Shazia asked me to log into her Jobcentre Plus online account and check if she had any messages.

Everyday e-challenges during the settlement phase

During the settlement phase, my interlocutors all had to tackle several critical e-services and e-processes that were vital for their successful transition into life as single women in the United Kingdom. The most important processes involved securing benefits and housing. Fully aware of their language and digital impediments and the urgency to respond to e-communication promptly for their social and economic needs, my interlocutors felt stressed. For example, fraught with stress, one answer they gave me about their benefits or other bureaucratic processes was, '*Pata hani'* ('I don't know') or *'Muji samaj nahi ata'* ('I don't understand'). As research indicates, as a result of their limited skills, vulnerabilities, and backgrounds, these women lack the ability and confidence required to interact with such e-services (Barth & Veit 2011).

My interlocutors were unaware of the workings of the UK's bureaucratic systems. Unable to effectively read digital or paper communications, they inadvertently missed critical information. Even with help, they found digital activities difficult, which led to their social exclusion, information poverty, and increased vulnerabilities (Mervyn, Simon & Allen 2014). In line with the findings of Singh & Chobotaru's (2022: 8) Canadian study, my study indicates that rural settings,

low-income households, and poor language were key determinants for my interlocutors' underutilization of e-services. Government websites state that people without computers can phone their helpline for assistance. One such example is the UC benefits helpline.[41] However, finding them difficult to navigate, my interlocutors hesitated to use these services. For example, using a telephone service proved challenging for them because they could not comprehend the automated voice asking them to choose the correct option to reach the appropriate assistance. Therefore, they mostly avoided the e-platforms and phone helplines available to them.

The digital challenges faced by benefits claimants extend beyond the initial application stage, however. Once registered, claimants must communicate regularly with the job centre through their online account. Poor e-communication can lead to benefits being suspended, which is a devastating prospect for my interlocutors, who relied on benefits for their financial survival and for having a place to live. E-services also permeate their everyday lives as they are required for dealing with personal banking, job applications, language classes, and payments for rent, utilities, and council tax. E-services necessitate ongoing interaction with online platforms. My interlocutors relied on people to provide e-assistance with their benefits claim administration, clarify their maximum pay-outs, housing benefits, and register changes in their circumstances, appeals, complaints, and regular Jobcentre communications, all of which take place online.[42]

To contextualize my interlocutors' situations, I shall now briefly explore the underutilization of formal support offered by government and non-government agencies to navigate the digital benefits system, before proceeding to examine the proliferation of digitalization and its effects on people like the women in my study.

Challenges in the UK digitalized benefits service: Jobcentre Plus

In April 2002, the UK Benefits Agency and the Employment Services merged and began operating under a new organization called Jobcentre Plus. This new service offered a fully integrated benefits claiming and work placement or job-seeking service for working-aged people, strengthening the link between welfare and work (Karagiannaki 2006). The aim of the Jobcentre Plus design was to deliver a multidimensional service offering an efficient, accurate, and fast benefits service and work-focused support to increase job access and labour-market entry (Karagiannaki 2006: 3). Jobcentre Plus reflected the ideal of 'work for those who can, security for those who cannot', representing a central element of New Labour's reform of the welfare state (Lister 2001). However, the implementation of UC by the coalition government in 2011 streamlined all benefits into a single form of public welfare. This new benefits system has proven chaotic, arguably failing both individuals and the community (Koch & Reeves 2021). It transforms the purpose of these systems, moving away from the provision of reliable social security (protecting individuals from hardship) towards the creation of a system that perpetuates uncertainty and instability for those relying on welfare, effectively institutionalizing social insecurity, in what might be described as 'state-sanctioned insecurity' (Koch & Reeves 2021).

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[41] See https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/contact-universal-credit
[42] See https://www.gov.uk/browse/benefits/manage-your-benefit (Accessed 6 March 2025)

The UK Government's digital by default[43] strategy involved the digitalization of government and council services, the aim being to make digital services more straightforward and convenient, ensuring that those able to use digital services would choose to do so while not excluding those who could not. However, the official website states that 28% of online people have not used e-government services (UK Government 2012: 11). It further explains that 'government transactions fall far short of the best standards', preventing people from using the government's digital transactions. The website also states that, in some circumstances, it is 'quicker to apply for some services by phone than by using the existing online service' (UK Government 2012: 14). Under the heading of 'assisted digital' (UK Government 2012: 16), referring to those who require digital assistance, the website acknowledges that not all government service users are online and that there are some people who cannot use e-services. It also recognizes that this population segment continues to use non-digital methods for e-government matters, such as phone calls, face-to-face interactions, and relying upon intermediaries. The website acknowledges the need to assist such people, the 'assisted digital', and recognizes that assistance is an integral part of digital services by default. The push to digitalize all government services means that many everyday tasks and facilities, including the UK benefits system and health services, are web-based. For example, the benefits website[44] states that to be assessed for and claim benefits payments, the first step is to create an account online or call the UC helpline to make an online application.

Digital inequalities

Early studies focused on physical access to technology. By the late 1990s, media studies had introduced the concept of the 'digital divide', replacing earlier terms such as 'information inequality' and 'media literacy' (van Dijk 2006). This concept highlighted the extensive proliferation of digitalization in daily life for those lacking digital access and the skills required to fully participate in an increasingly digitalized society.[45] Initial research focused on the first-level divide, examining non-users and the frequency with which people use the internet, while the second-level digital divide covered digital skills and literacy (Dewan & Riggins 2005; Friemel & Signer 2010; Hargittai 2002; van Deursen & van Dijk 2010; Pearce & Rice 2013). Later research focused on digital inequalities, considering digital skills and social inequalities such as gender, race, and income (Heeks 2022; Robinson, Cotten, Ono, Quan-Haase, Mesch, Chen, Schulz, Hale & Stern 2015; Warschauer 2002), along with other factors such as content, language, education, literacy, community and social resources, or the speed of connection. Therefore, while digital divide studies were mainly concerned with access, digital inequalities focus more on contextual inequalities and quality of use. It is now commonly recognized that, more than availability, we need to consider

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[43] See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/296336/Government_Digital_Strateegy_-_November_2012.pdf
[44] See https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/how-to-claim
[45] See https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/tackling-digital-divide-house-commons-4-november-2021 (Accessed 10 August 2024)

affordability (socioeconomic conditions) and adaptation (culture, skills) (Hudson 2013). Access alone does not create an emancipated society as connected disadvantaged social actors can still be exploited by other connected actors; hence even access can introduce new inequalities in an unequal society (Heeks 2022).

The Local Government Association[46] estimates that 11.7 million people (22%) in the United Kingdom lack the digital skills needed for everyday life. The Office of National Statistics[47] estimates that 58% of internet non-users are women. More generally, a gender imbalance persists in information and communication technologies (ICT) and related sectors (Kamberidou & Pascall 2020), along with a grey digital divide among the elderly (Friemel 2016) and lower access to ICT among those with lower levels of education and income (Atkinson, Black & Curtis 2008). A study of over 1,200 people by Citizen Advice Scotland in 2018 showed that one-third of respondents were non-users or had difficulty using a computer.[48] On the Citizens Advice website,[49] people facing difficulties are asked to seek support from their local Citizens Advice centre. It states that Citizens Advice can provide help with benefits applications, eligibility for UC, preparing for Jobcentre appointments, and checking if a benefits payment is correct. Digital difficulties are seen as a social justice and human rights issue (Sanders & Scanlon 2020) affecting many.

Access, skills, and cost disparities within refugee populations lead to digital inequalities (Alam & Imran 2014), and people struggle to access the services and support they require. These inequalities also occur in transnational marriage contexts, as was the case for my interlocutors, who came to the United Kingdom with poor language and digital skills. On the other hand, studies also show that asylum-related migrants are more digitally connected than the general population in their home country (Merisalo & Jaunhiainen 2019), and that their digital use increases as their journey becomes more stable. Merisalo & Jaunhiainen's (2019: 698) study also found that the digital disparities between men and women disappeared as they became more settled in the host country, and that their internet use depended on local circumstances, including whether or not they possessed a device (Merisalo & Jaunhiainen 2019:701). In migrant populations, university education increased the probability of seeking online information (Merisalo & Jaunhiainen 2019: 700), as can be seen in the case of educated interlocutors like Saira and Lubna. Importantly, though, in line with the study by Alam and Imran (2014) on social inclusion and the digital divide among Australian refugee migrants, during the initial settlement stages, migrants face acute digital struggles, as was the case with my interlocutors. Alam and Imran (2014: 385) point out that digital exclusion is more pronounced among newly arrived migrants owing to issues of affordability and language and literacy skills.

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[46] See https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/tackling-digital-divide-house-commons-4-november-2021
[47] See https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04#how-does-internet-usage-vary-for-different-ethnic-groups
[48] See https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/consultations/category-1-10-weeks/199136-open-communications/responses/citizens-advice-scotland/?v=199460
[49] See https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/contact-us/help-to-claim/
(Accessed 20 August 2024)

Building on this, I shall now examine some research that explores the scope and effectiveness of the digital assistance provided by officially designated intermediaries.

Digital intermediaries: Scholarship on formal support to navigate digital challenges

Current research highlights governmental and other agencies' response to the need to reduce the medical, legal, social, and other services and information gap caused by the expanding digital environment (Chang, Bakken, Brown, Houston, Kreps, Kukafka, Safran & Stavr 2004; UK Government Digital Strategy 2012[50]; House of Commons digital skills crisis reports 2016-17).[51] One response is to assign officially appointed intermediaries (akin to frontline workers) to support people (Mervyn & Allen 2012). However, accessing such frontline workers at central locations, such as local libraries or council offices, is a time-consuming process (Harvey *et al.* 2021: 6-7). Moreover, as my findings underscore, English-language proficiency is also needed to help with communications.

A more recent study focused on the cost and challenges associated with digital inequalities in the UK's local council services and the support provided for those who lack digital skills. Here, Harvey *et al.* (2021: 11) explain that 'information intermediaries' provide critical e-support, working from designated local government spaces, support contact centres, or NGOs. Such intermediaries broker between users, information sources, and e-services. Harvey *et al.* (2021) make some important arguments in this regard. First, they highlight that to access help from such 'information intermediaries,' people must travel to the contact centre, incurring costs in terms of money and time. Secondly, non-English speakers face further barriers, requiring translators to help them communicate. More importantly, such help does not allow the digitally disadvantaged to improve their digital skills. Instead, they point to the support provided by 'digital carers', who, they argue, 'are much like carers who look after ill family members' (Harvey *et al.* 2021: 11). Local authority staff encourage the digitally challenged to ask a family member for help (Harvey *et al.* 2021: 7) or to solicit 'third-party support', such as from people from their social network (Harvey 2021: 11).

Notwithstanding the formal support available, as discussed in the next section, my interlocutors navigated their digital challenges by seeking assistance from ad hoc 'informal go-betweens'.

Informal Go-betweens' for Digital Issues: A Consequence of a Digitalized Society

My interlocutors relied on a diverse range of individuals for their digital needs. On one end of the spectrum were officially appointed professionals or volunteers operating from designated spaces, as discussed in research. On the other end of the spectrum, however, was the informal digital help

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[50] See
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/296336/Government_Digital_Stratetegy_-_November_2012.pdf
[51] See https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmsctech/270/270.pdf
(Accessed 25 August 2024)

my interlocutors sought from 'informal go-betweens', such as acquaintances, friends, housemates, colleagues, or even strangers they encountered in a variety of places. These individuals possessed varying levels of digital proficiency and general know-how, and were called upon informally to provide ad hoc support, often with mixed outcomes. They were not situated within designated spaces, nor did they possess professional expertise. Interactions with these 'informal go-betweens' were spontaneous, one-off, intermittent, or undertaken with varying degrees of regularity.

It is important to note that these people do not fit the typical profile of a supportive family member acting as a 'digital carer' (Harvey *et al.* 2021: 11), or of digital intermediaries (Mervyn & Allen 2012), who typically offer support in formally designated spaces. Rather, they act as 'informal go-betweens', playing a crucial role in helping individuals to navigate the challenges of a digitalized society in the absence of any formal provision of help, or in the face of inadequate formal support.

However, as I shall explain in the following section, 'informal go-betweenage' in digital matters entails both risks and rewards.

'Informal go-betweenage' for digital issues: Risks and rewards

My interlocutors' encounters with 'informal go-betweens' for digital issues had varied outcomes. Some positive encounters include Irum's experience when, desperate and with no money, she turned to me for help with accessing her online account, checking if her benefits payment had arrived, or when she asked her English teacher or classmate to help her set up or make an online payment for council tax and utility bills. Another illustration of positive support is when Farah and Irum asked for my help with registering with their GP and for mental health support via the NHS. Fatima regularly asked me or colleagues where she volunteered to help set up and understand her utility bills, a penalty notice for late payment, or high gas bills. Bilquis also solicited a work colleague's help with her job application to move from temporary to permanent work and take on night-shift work with the same employer.

Some encounters were less positive, however. 'Go-betweenage' for digital matters can lead to people handing over their digital work to someone else and, in turn, falling into an unhealthy dependent relationship and power dynamic. I observed this in Irum's case, as described in Chapter Four, when she entrusted Aisha with all her digital processes but then fell under her obligation and ended up feeling very vulnerable and stuck. The same situation can be observed in Farah's case, where her lawyer-cum-landlord managed her divorce correspondences, creating a hierarchical and dependent relationship that Farah was afraid to damage or break. In these relationships, the risk for the women involved is higher because their poor language and digital skills mean they become overly reliant on 'informal go-betweens' to manage their digital processes. In digital matters, the primary interaction is between a screen filled with complex information and the 'informal go-between', who interprets the e-information, shares it, and manages the data input process. In these encounters, women struggle to manage both the process and the outcome, which leaves them feeling stressed and pressured in relation to their circumstances and decision-making (Lloyd *et al.* 2013: 123). Moreover, if data are input incorrectly, this is difficult to undo, requiring the help of another 'informal go-between' to help manage the inaccuracies.

Help from 'informal go-betweens' with digital issues can lead to unexpected outcomes. For example, in Irum's case (as explained in Chapter Four), her information intermediary at her woman's refuge lacked the necessary knowledge of bureaucratic matters and filled out Irum's online benefits application incorrectly, leading to delays in her payments. In turn, Irum faced life without monetary resources, leaving her with no choice but to move in with Aisha, where she fell into a situation of domestic servitude. Another example is when, acting as Irum's 'informal go-between', Aisha used her email account and password to access her emails without permission. She discovered Irum's letter to the local borough about Aisha's poor behaviour, after which they argued and fell out. They never spoke again, and Irum escaped Aisha's demands to cook, clean, and babysit. This newfound freedom left Irum free to volunteer, gain work experience, and start ESOL classes – all things that Aisha had stopped her from doing. This led to improvements in Irum's confidence and language skills (as I describe in greater detail in Chapter Six).

Despite possessing varying levels of proficiency, knowledge, and trustworthiness, 'informal go-betweens' in these situations are trusted to give e-information and complete e-forms accurately. For example, Irum hoped that, in my capacity as a 'informal go-between,' I would read and translate digitalized information accurately and help her calculate her benefits. However, owing to my limited understanding, I was unable to help her. When women rely on 'informal go-betweens' for digital matters, they share private and sensitive information, running the risk of it being misused. For example, when Irum's service charge amounts changed, she could not communicate with the bank and amend the standing order we had set up together. Irum asked her housemate for help and gave her full access to all her banking details. Although nothing untowardly happened, I wondered about these women's safety in such digital interactions. Unable to set up e-services by herself, Irum had little choice but to take the risk.

As time passed and the women began to attend English classes and live independently, I noticed improvements in their ability to write messages and speak English (even though they may have been relying upon the autocorrect function to write messages, overall, I noted a decrease in Urdu and an increase in communications in English). Once they had acquired a smartphone, often purchased second-hand, they learnt to access their bank accounts, entertainment channels, and news platforms, and to use social media, WhatsApp, and text messages to stay connected – things that had not been available in their marital homes. Over time, they were able to use aspects of everyday digital tools and services effortlessly.

However, at the end of the fieldwork, bureaucratic e-services remained an ongoing problem for some, mainly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of in-person meetings. For example, in May 2020, after my fieldwork was finished, Farah and Razia were evicted from their flat. This was particularly distressing because all communication and services were online – a system they could not navigate. They asked for my help, and I began corresponding with the local authority and the homeless unit by email. I stopped after they were allocated a bilingual case worker, who assisted them in moving to a room in an HMO in a different borough. Farah reached out again in August 2020 to ask for my help with a benefits refund demand because of an

overpayment by the government.[52] Finally, I assisted Farah again in November 2020 when her benefits were at risk of being stopped owing to an error on her account. I assisted Farah with her e-communications and with uploading the necessary documents to resolve her issues. In one call with the local authority, the call handler said, 'One mistake on your online benefits account, and you are trapped'. His comment accurately reflects the online benefits structures and processes, which create a sense of insecurity sanctioned by the state (Koch & Reeves 2021). The system causes fear and distress in individuals like Farah and my interlocutors, who struggle with English and digital proficiency while being entirely dependent on benefits for their survival.

In February 2023, Bilquis asked me to help her apply online for ILR in the United Kingdom, which involves filling out a long, complicated form. We completed the form together using my smartphone (as hers was incompatible). In May 2023, I helped Shazia stop a direct debit, which she had accidentally set up, and which was causing her to lose money. Shazia has also solicited help with online tasks from her fellow classmates. One of these relationships turned toxic and complex, with Shazia left feeling trapped and controlled by a male classmate, which led to an increase in her mental health problems.

Although designated digital frontline workers offer digital support, it is insufficient. To navigate their ongoing digital issues, the women in my study reached out to 'informal go-betweens' informally and in an ad hoc manner. Although such 'informal go-betweenage' is crucial, especially to complete time-sensitive digital needs, it nonetheless poses risks. In such relationships, sometimes people hand over their digital affairs entirely to the 'informal go-between' and are then left feeling stuck, dominated, or cheated. So far, research has focused primarily on people formally designated to provide digital support. My study has uncovered the role that lay and unauthorized people from diverse backgrounds and with varied skills – 'informal go-betweens' – play in managing e-services for those facing digital inequalities. I would therefore contend that relying upon 'informal go-betweens' for help with digital issues presents both risks and rewards. It is a consequence of the policy emphasis on digitalization and arises in response to the challenges individuals face in navigating the widespread proliferation of digital systems.

Following my fieldwork, I observed that, as my interlocutors' English proficiency and general knowledge improved, so too did their digital capabilities. For example, Bilquis is now able to successfully manage online activities such as finding accommodation, purchasing goods, searching for information, and communicating through general emails. Irum, Farah, and Razia all communicate with me in English through WhatsApp. When I am with them, I can see that they use the internet to seek information and news. Irum can read and send short emails but struggles to navigate bureaucratic processes. Shazia can now read and write in English more fluently and manage some e-services. Thanks to improvements in their language and digital skills, Saira and Lubna have increased their bureaucratic knowledge and know-how about life in the United Kingdom.

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[52] See recent demands to repay overpayments in carers' benefits: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68774399 (accessed 19 November 2024).

A Perspective of a 'Go-between'

I did not collect data specifically on the perspective of 'informal go-betweens'. However, from my personal experiences, I would suggest that individuals in this role possess varying levels of experience, aptitudes, strengths, and degrees of comfort. 'Go-betweenage' can be time-consuming, frustrating, and burdensome, especially if it is ongoing. 'Informal go-betweens' also face the dilemma of whether to agree to help. The women in my study mentioned that people sometimes refused to help, while others were willing to offer such help. For example, in Bailie's (2010: 165) study of 'ethnic cultural brokers', Makucha readily gave thirty to forty minutes to support refugees. Simon (Bailie 2010: 182-3), a certified counsellor and psychologist, accompanied his clients to psychiatry appointments to assist with translating for them, without remuneration. He accompanied his clients so that they did not suffer or miss out on treatment options.

My fieldwork practice is supported by my life-coaching training,[53] and parallels for my approach can be found in Yarris's (2021) ethics of care in fieldwork. I also found that additional support was vital for helping my interlocutors address their challenges. Yarris (2021) argues that individuals like herself are crucial in helping migrants to navigate complex, impersonal immigration enforcement bureaucracies and providing moral support. My study mirrors these findings. I must nonetheless question whether by filling in the 'gaps' created by the reconfiguration and digitalization of welfare provisions, I was in fact complicit in upholding these very systems (Koch & James 2020: 3).

Although I found 'go-betweenage' time-consuming, accompanying my interlocutors was how I planned and managed my time in the field. For practical issues, 'informal go-betweenage' was easy because I primarily assisted women by translating for them and providing explanations alongside a third-party professional whose expertise relieved me of a significant portion of my responsibility. Drawing on my life coach training, my aim was to reduce dependence. I encouraged the women to fill out forms themselves (by providing writing guidance that they could copy), speak, and read independently in English – tasks they now undertake independently. In contrast, 'go-betweenage' for digital issues proved more challenging. A mistake in this area can lead to severe consequences, as the call handler in Farah's case described, and as demonstrated by the delays in Irum's benefits. I was nervous about digital tasks and avoided taking direct responsibility for inputting data. I was also apprehensive of being blamed for unintended adverse outcomes of my well-intended actions.

I developed strong relationships with all the women in my study. Some of these relationships have continued over 8 years, leading to lasting friendships. I have come to truly care for them. Although 'go-betweenage' is challenging and time-consuming, I find it hard to ignore my interlocutors when they reach out for support. However, as I know that they can use them, I now frequently direct them to relevant services. For example, when Shazia wanted to apply for a Personal Independence Payment (PIP), I asked her to seek help from Citizens Advice. I also encourage them to take on tasks themselves. For example, when Farah and I were chatting about her daughter's nursery education, I Googled the closest nursery, gave her the address, and suggested that she go and register her daughter. When I am busy or unwell and unable to help, my interlocutors are

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[53] As a result of my coaching training, I am always careful to avoid dependence and to foster independence and self-reliance. This awareness informs my interactions and practice.

considerate and understanding of my situation. I rarely feel pressured to assist them. However, I know that they reach out only when they are faced with challenging, hard-to-resolve issues. In my post-fieldwork visits, my interlocutors explained that they avoid contacting me because they do not want to disturb me. They nonetheless inform me of significant events in their lives, such as engagements, marriages, births, and divorces. They regularly reciprocate with flowers, chocolates, coffee, or food at their homes and sometimes in a restaurant if they are in paid employment. Following my fieldwork, I have continued to support my interlocutors; this gives me a sense of inner happiness, and I view it as a form of '*seva*', which, as explained previously, is rooted in the Sanskrit word '*sev*,' meaning to serve. My '*seva*' is not about the research I am undertaking; it is a way to give back to the women and the community of which I am part. I honour the relationship developed between my interlocutors and me through this research project – relationships that were rarely available to me as a young bride in a foreign country with no family nearby. While I was embedded in my in-laws' family and community, I was afraid to share my problems with others, and I wanted things to be different for my interlocutors.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have applied the 'ethical (re)positioning' conceptual framework to examine how my interlocutors (re)position themselves as single women with the legal right to reside in the United Kingdom, 'keep going', and navigate the initial 28-day 'move-on' period and subsequent transition towards independent living. To successfully settle in the United Kingdom, an individual can enter employment and private accommodation or register for benefits and council housing and comply with the Jobcentre Plus e-regulations to maintain their benefits payments. My interlocutors faced challenges in registering for benefits, navigating banking, housing, travel, and divorce issues, learning English and digital skills, and transitioning to paid employment (which I shall address in Chapter Six). As a result of their carceral experiences, their language and digital capabilities were compromised, and they had little know-how of UK life and its bureaucratic processes. Their capabilities remained poor because, in their abusive marital homes in the United Kingdom, they were not allowed out or supported to learn about life in the United Kingdom. In addition, their carceral experiences meant that they carried a lamination of poor mental health, shame and stigma, abandonment, and loneliness, all with no family nearby. The effects of their past carcerality carried into and compounded their dependency and vulnerability in the following phase. The central question addressed in this chapter is, therefore: how did my interlocutors 'keep going' and navigate the complexities of this challenging settlement phase towards independent living in the United Kingdom?

The 2010 election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in the United Kingdom ushered in a 'new era of austerity' characterized by funding cuts disguised as market-based reforms, which severely impacted welfare advice services (Forbess & James 2017: 1465). This austerity-driven approach led to a situation of 'austerity localism', where reduced public sector funding limited frontline support, leaving many without assistance (Koch 2021). Numerous studies have focused on frontline workers operating within designated institutions, such as local council offices, NGOs, and private enterprises (Arambewela-Colley 2021; Bailie, 2010; Björkman, 2021: 3; Harvey *et. al.* 2021; James 2011: 335; Koch & James 2020; Mervyn & Allen 2012: 1133; Sturman & Chandra

2021: 101-6; Tuckett 2018; Yarris 2021). However, in the cases of the migrants studied here, poor education and language skills increased their vulnerabilities (see also the study by Lloyd *et al.* 2013: 129). This made accessing crucial information – a vital aspect of the settlement process – extremely difficult (George & Chaze 2009). Moreover, essential support for early settlement, which comes from family, relatives, and community (see George & Chaze 2009: 272-3), was scarce for my interlocutors. This chapter has therefore highlighted the additional help women solicited in an informal, ad hoc manner to 'keep going' during this early phase.

I argue that, to navigate this initial phase towards independent living, these women sought help from 'informal go-betweens' – people not formally appointed to support them – including flatmates, a kind employee in a lawyer's office, a friend, a classmate, a teacher, someone on the street, and myself, a researcher. Drawing on Irum's and Shazia's case studies, I have shown the critical role that Aisha and I played, as 'informal go-betweens', in helping Irum and Shazia to find and move into council accommodation and avoid homelessness. After that, through a consideration of Irum, Shazia, and Bilquis's banking and travel challenges, I have illustrated how 'informal go-betweenage' becomes a means to learn, build confidence, and transition toward independent living.

As a result of the extensive digitalization of services, these women also encountered digital challenges, with their lack of capabilities in this area leading to information poverty and poor utilization of online government services (see Mervyn, Simon & Allen 2014, and Singh & Chobotaru 2022: 8). This increased their disconnection, knowledge divide, and exclusion. On this, Alam and Imran (2104: 357) point to the role of ICT in inclusion, arguing that digital exclusion can 'stall the process' of migrant integration. Although designated brokers and intermediaries were available to provide digital assistance, such support was insufficient or hard to navigate. Consequently, the women turned to 'informal go-betweens' for help with registering for benefits and avoiding poverty and homelessness. I argue that this 'informal go-betweenage' is a consequence of bureaucracies and digitalization. It emerges in response to the pervasive nature of digital systems and provides crucial help in facing digital challenges owing to digital inequalities and inadequate and hard-to-navigate state and NGO support provisions.

As I have set out to demonstrate, 'go-betweenage' presents both risks and rewards, leading to various outcomes. These included positive results such as help with banking, travel, divorce, benefits-related activities, setting up or making online payments, registering with a GP, accessing mental health support, dealing with penalty notices and overcharges, and making job applications. Conversely, less favourable encounters in 'go-betweenage' occur when 'informal go-betweens' possess inadequate digital or bureaucratic skills – for example, Irum's delays in her benefits payments were a result of errors on her online form. This situation impelled Irum to accept Aisha's offer of accommodation, who then cornered her into a situation of domestic servitude. 'Informal go-betweenage' is ineffective when 'informal go-betweens' lack knowledge, as was the case, for example, when I could not help Irum navigate the online benefits calculator. It can lead to unexpected outcomes, such as when Aisha, who had Irum's email account's password, read Irum's emails to her local authority without her permission, which upset her. Immediately after this, Aisha and Irum fell out; Aisha never spoke to Irum again and escaped Aisha's control.

In digital domains, women's poor competencies mean that they rely heavily on 'informal go-betweens', leading to power imbalances and vulnerabilities, such as when Aisha took advantage of Irum's vulnerabilities, or when Farah was scared of damaging her relationship with her lawyer-cum-landlord. The need to share sensitive information in digital matters, such as one's date of birth, passport details, online password, and bank details, leaves women vulnerable to potential misuse or exploitation. Another risk is when 'informal go-betweens' lack the necessary knowledge on bureaucratic matters or are poorly equipped to navigate and interact with digital platform information accurately, which creates further challenges. Conversely, the risks posed by 'informal go-betweenage' are less when it comes to practical issues, especially when a third party is involved (for example, a housing officer). In these encounters, women can learn by watching, listening, and participating in the process, which leads to learning and increased independence and confidence. Notwithstanding these experiences, as time passed, the women's digital skills and general confidence improved. Today, although they might still seek support from formal intermediaries or 'informal go-betweens' for complex bureaucratic issues, my interlocutors all manage their everyday digital and non-digital activities independently.

My findings prompt some critical reflections, particularly in relation to digitalization within state services. The government's digital strategy has introduced brokers, intermediaries, and advisers as part of public and private sector service frameworks. However, the provision remains insufficient to meet the complexities of users' needs. This raises pertinent questions about the scope of e-support required and whether the state can offer appropriate digital assistance to reduce or eliminate the reliance on 'informal go-betweens' for navigating services effectively. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that, during the early settlement phase, my interlocutors could not navigate bureaucratic and digital processes without 'informal go-betweens'. However, this need for support is not limited to people like these women. Other segments of the population also require digital support.[54] Moreover, given the effects of austerity measures and the rapid proliferation of digitalization, it is uncertain whether the state can provide sufficiently robust services to eliminate the need for 'informal go-betweens' to assist with digital issues. I would contend that this reliance on 'informal go-betweens' will persist, as they are an inevitable component of a digitalized and bureaucratized state and society.

In the following chapter, I shall examine the (in)efficacy of Jobcentre Plus work coaches who offer desk-based coaching through signposting and referrals. By accompanying my interlocutors, I explore how, as benefits recipients, these women navigate their initial transition from welfare to work, as mandated by the UK benefits system. In doing so, they find themselves find themselves escaping deportation only to confront the carcerality of the welfare state, underpinned by a punitive logic.

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[54] See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-50812576 and https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/mar/17/half-uk-families-excluded-modern-digital-society-study. (Accessed 20 April 2024). Almost four in ten (38%) of households struggled with online skills, with parents or children, or both, possessing inadequate functional or critical digital abilities. Parents who lacked functional skills (17%) were sometimes unable to set up an email account or make online payments.

CHAPTER SIX

CARCERAL LOGIC IN THE UK BENEFITS SYSTEM: CONDITIONALITY, SANCTIONS AND LIVING WITH FEAR

In Chapters Five and Six, I set out to examine three broad challenges that my interlocutors faced during the 28-day 'moving-on' period, the early settlement phase, and the transition from welfare to work while seeking to live independently in the United Kingdom. In the previous chapter, I examined how 'informal go-betweens' assisted my interlocutors in registering for benefits and housing to avoid poverty and homelessness, and in settling as single women living as legal residents in the United Kingdom without any natal family nearby. The challenges they faced during the early settlement period remain the focus of this chapter.

Here, I examine their experiences of transitioning from welfare to work and navigating 'Claimant Commitments', mandates, sanctions, and fears of benefit suspensions – a process often marked by apprehension and anxiety. Claiming benefits meant entering into a carceral space of surveillance and fear; fear of making mistakes, breaching the 'Claimant Commitment', and being sanctioned. The rules and expectations were confusing, frequently perceived as unattainable, and failure often carried sever consequences, such as homelessness and destitution. The transition from deportation threats to ILR, and from welfare to work – which will be explored now – illustrates how escaping one carceral condition can lead to another, as women find themselves subject to the welfare state's punitive regimes.

My interlocutors navigated these challenging carceral escapes in differing ways and with varied outcomes. To illustrate their experiences, I begin with Irum's case study to highlight the challenges she faced in following her Jobcentre Plus work coach's directions.

Encounters with The Welfare State: Irum's Jobcentre Plus Experiences

Wishing to learn English, Irum asked her work coach how she could go about doing so. The work coach explained that ESOL classes were free for people on benefits. Moreover, doing her best to learn English and then secure a job thereafter were two self-directed activities making up Irum's 'Claimant Commitment'. To avoid sanctions or penalties on her benefits, she needed to stay on track with these commitments. The coach explained that it was not her job to find English classes for Irum, however, she could signpost her to some classes. Although she did not use the term itself, I observed that work coaches used signposting at each Jobcentre Plus meeting I attended.[55] On that day, too, Irum's work coach signposted her to a third-party agency; in this instance, an ESOL representative from a local college who was enrolling students at the Jobcentre. As we walked away, Irum looked confused and said, 'I did not understand what she said'. I, too, was

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[55] Signposting is a practice whereby professionals invoke third-party agencies to redirect clients to services they cannot provide (Alexander & Hofstetter 2021: 120). Signposting also involves providing individuals with information to enable them to contact other services independently, which places a greater demand on people to reach out to these organizations (White *et.al.* 2022: 5106). These forms of coaching proved challenging for my interlocutors to follow.

surprised that Irum's work coach had assumed that Irum understood her 'Claimant Commitments' and sanctions without a proper explanation or clarification.

I helped Irum to locate the ESOL representative at the Jobcentre. Unfortunately, they were not there that day. Irum looked disappointed and worried. She did not know how to find an ESOL class. I suggested trying the local college directly. We contacted the college, who informed us that classes would not be available until February 2019, which was nearly 3 months from that point. Disappointed, Irum decided to ask her work coach for help. Irum requested that I accompany her to her next Jobcentre appointment. Luckily, the work coach found an ESOL assessment taking place that same afternoon in the neighbouring borough. She sent over a referral and booked Irum a place for the assessment. Irum's work coach reminded her that, as part of her 'Claimant Commitment', Irum was expected first to learn English and then to find a job.

The work coach wished to organize biweekly meetings with Irum to stay updated about her efforts to learn English. I noticed that, anxious to stay on track with her Jobcentre commitments, Irum felt stressed about not finding English classes. She worried that if she did not make any progress with these undertakings, her benefits payments would be negatively affected. As Raitakari and Günther (2021: 83) point out, there is a cultural expectation that clients who access employment, health, social, and housing services must demonstrate responsibility. This places the burden of self-management on them, often leading to feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (see Tuckett 2015, who underscores the insecurities her interlocutors feel in the face of immigration bureaucracies). My other interlocutor, Bilquis, also experienced the same feelings of stress about complying with 'Claimant Commitments'. Despite the signposting provided by her coach, Irum was unable to find and travel to ESOL classes.

My interlocutors were all women who were alone and affected by a lamination of challenging carceral experiences leading to poor skills, confidence, and mental health. Once they were receiving UC and deemed not to have any obstructions in preparing for and finding work, they were held responsible for finding employment. Noncompliance often led to sanctions and suspension of benefits, provoking significant anxiety. They had escaped deportation but now faced the carcerality of the punitive welfare state.

I argue that the women in my study experienced the welfare state as carceral (Moran *et al.* 2018), because it is underpinned by sanctions, conditionality and surveillance. The support offered by Jobcentre work coaches was impersonal and structured through bureaucratic systems that often felt coercive and moralising (Koch, 2018; Ticktin, 2011). In the cases examined here, the Jobcentre work coaches' approach proved not only incompatible in supporting women's transition from welfare to work, but also profoundly stressful, reflecting a misguided and overly linear expectation that disregarded the structural and personal barriers they faced in this transition. Drawing on the concept of bureaucratic care which describes the tension between care as a humanistic ethic and care as a depoliticised mechanism of control (Turkel 2007; Stevenson 2014), I argue that although the Jobcentre website positions work coaches' support as personalised guidance, oriented to advise, assist, and facilitate transition into work, it was more often experienced as a form of carcerality. This is a form that speaks in the language of support on the one hand; yet on the other

hand, disciplines behaviour, underpinned by a constant threat of benefit withdrawal and destitution.

My interlocutors struggled to contend with their coaches' surveillance couched as support and the associated stresses, and ultimately, only some were able to transition into paid work. Thus, bureaucratic care highlights this paradoxical interplay which ultimately remains grounded in a carceral logic. My interlocutors' trajectories reveal their carceral escapes – while freed from deportation, they were repositioned in new instruments of control, not through physical walls, but through bureaucratic rules, surveillance, and sanctions.

To support my argument, first, I expand on how the state's austerity measures have a carceral logic. Next, I examine how work coaches' bureaucratised support is ineffective by drawing on the concept of Bureaucratic Care (Turkel 2007). I demonstrate how institutionalised support is not only conditional, impersonal and structured, but often experienced as coercive. To illustrate these carceral logics and my interlocutors' recursive carceral escapes, I draw on Irum's and Fatima's experiences to argue that the reality contrasts with the DWP's claims about their supportive coaches. these women's work coaches were not customer-focused, empathetic, or compassionate. Next, I examine women's experiences with the conditionality and sanctions of the benefits system, as well as the anxiety and stress this causes for Irum and Bilquis. In the final part of this chapter, I shall use Bilquis' and Irum's cases to demonstrate that, rather than a simple, linear process, the transition from welfare to work is an unpredictable, complex journey influenced by structural and individual factors. I shall end with some concluding remarks.

The UK Benefits System: Carceral Logics of Conditions, Mandates, and Sanctions

Austerity is best understood as a form of structural adjustment policy (SAP) with historical and global dimensions. Rather than fostering compliance, such policies often produce dissent and dissatisfaction (Powers & Rakopoulos 2019). Muehlebach (2016), building on Bear's (2015) and Knight's (2015) studies, argues that the logics of debt and indebtedness historically imposed on the Global South are now mirrored in Europe. Austerity in Europe is also underpinned by a punitive logic and is accompanied by the increasing use of sanctions and active work-seeking mandates, reflecting a broader shift toward responsibilised citizenship as a key policy aim (Fletcher-Morgan & Leyland 2010; Knotz 2019; Peeters 2013, 2019; Rose 2000; Verhoeven & Tonkens 2013).

In the United Kingdom, UC is a means-tested benefit designed to cover basic living costs, available to individuals with low income, the unemployed, or those unable to work. The UK benefits system functions as a form of governmentality, shifting responsibility onto individuals and enforcing this through moral discourses of self-reliance (Barnett 2003; Rose 2000; Peeters 2013), while offering targeted support to help people find work (Taylor-Gooby 2008: 21). It constructs a subject understood as inherently deficient and in need of coerced self-improvement (Wright 2016). Under Universal Credit (UC), benefit entitlement is conditional on demonstrating responsibility and is regulated through sanctions and benefit suspensions (Dwyer 2010). As a condition of receiving benefits, people must commit to 'full-time' work and job-search efforts (Hughes 2024).

Conditionality results in vulnerable people being unreasonably deemed ineligible for the rights to social citizenship (Reeves & Loopstra 2016). In the UK, it is assumed that sanctions encourage employment, with policymakers also expecting wider benefits such as improved health and lower child poverty (DWP, 2011, 2018b). Similarly, the bedroom tax illustrates how austerity policy operates through carceral logic. Framed as efficient housing management, it punished under-occupancy through financial penalties, restricting mobility for those in arrears or lacking access to smaller homes (Bogue 2019). Rather than enabling choice, such measures constrained movement and imposed discipline. Davey & Koch (2021) argue that austerity policies reflect an 'authoritarian turn,' experienced as 'everyday authoritarianism,' which extends legal coercion into people's homes and social networks. This disproportionately impacts low-income households already in precarious conditions (Garthwaite 2016; Loopstra *et al.* 2015; Reeves & Loopstra 2021). Austerity exacerbated the very insecurities it claimed to address.

As research shows, the risk of sanctions for minor missteps creates a sense of everyday surveillance and constraint, which people navigate through avoidance, reluctant compliance, or informal resistance (Davey & Koch 2021). This requires assessing whom they can turn to, how much help to request, and which relationships can act as informal safety nets (Smith 2017). For some, such as adult children returning to live with parents, these arrangements can create dynamics that generate intergenerational tensions (Narotzky 2021), while lone mothers can face conditions under UC that disregard caregiving responsibilities and penalise them despite limited capacity to work (Cain 2016). As Smith (2017) shows, navigating the benefits system often produces feelings of humiliation, with claimants portrayed as undeserving or morally lacking.

Faced with these policies, Pusceddu, Loperfido & Narotzky (2021) argue that people often feel powerless and confused by contradictory rules. Their responses, whether disengaged, cautious, or resistant, are shaped by how they experience and understand the state. Moreover, the effects of benefit stringencies are mixed: while some may enter work, others, especially those in vulnerable situations, experience harm. Lowering the benefit cap, which limits support for workless households, has been linked to increased mental health issues (Reeves, Fransham, Stewart, Reader, Patrick 2024). Williams (2021) found that sanctions significantly increased anxiety and depression, particularly after sanction lengths were extended. In the US context, Davis (2019) showed that stringent conditionality worsens mental health among low-educated single mothers. The threat of sanctions was disproportionately harmful for those with pre-existing mental health conditions (Dwyer*,* Scullion, Jones, McNeill, Stewart 2020).

Koch (2018) argues that such coercive policies reshape everyday life, compelling people to navigate state systems misaligned with their lived realities. Even though Jobcentres have frontline personal advisors who are meant to tailor support to the needs of the individual claimants and offer referrals to local specialist support (Finn 2018: 224), there is a tension between offering support while imposing benefit conditionality and sanctions (Finn 2018: 217). I argue that the coaches' support often functions in carceral ways, due to the constant surveillance, and conditionality embedded in welfare bureaucracies and their impersonal approach. As I explain next, although on paper, coaches were meant to 'focus on the real task of helping people enter and progress in work' (Millar 2018: 49), in practice my interlocutors experienced that support to be restrictive, supervisory, and punitive, embedded within a system of coercive policies – experienced as another carceral escape.

Universal Credit: Bureaucratised Support through Work Coaches

The DWP website[56] states that, within the UK benefits system, the work coach is customer-focused, a good communicator, and has the ability to manage difficult cases. It describes work coaches as supportive and client-focused, offering personalised guidance to help people into employment. These coaches are expected to build trust and motivate claimants across digital, telephone, and face-to-face interactions. However, as Toerien, Sainsbury, Drew, & Irvine (2013) note, personalisation often breaks down due to institutional structures and often results in partial or non-personalised services. In line with these findings, in my own research, I observed how the Jobcentre coaching process is often rigid and linear, and underpinned by the threat of sanctions, creating fear among those unable to meet their 'Claimant Commitment'.

Moreover, as Howe's (1990) study of unemployment in Northern Ireland shows, welfare systems have long been preoccupied with questions of deservingness, drawing boundaries between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Koch and James (2022) similarly argue that governing the welfare state is as much a moral endeavour as a political and economic one, with advisers' everyday work shaped by differing visions of moral worth and social justice. In Germany, Streinzer & Terpe (2023) show that small business owners frame deservingness in terms of hard work and being productive, distrusting both the poor and the wealthy if they are perceived as failing to contribute. These examples suggest that bureaucratic support is never neutral: it is influenced by punitive structures, shaped by moral judgements that determine who receives support and on what terms.

Drawing on Marilyn (Dee) Ray's work, Turkel (2007: 58) describes bureaucratic care as a dialectic between humanistic care (ethical, social, spiritual) and bureaucratic imperatives (economic, legal, political). This lens is useful for examining how support and control are jointly embedded in governance. As Koch (2018; 108) highlights, people's lives are complex and incommensurable with the assumptions of official policies embedded in support bureaucracies. Similarly, Stevenson's (2014) study of Canada's tuberculosis support and suicide prevention shows how care becomes bureaucratised and depersonalised, which she terms 'anonymous care' (Stevenson 2014: 5), experienced as indifferent and uncaring. Moreover, bureaucratised care can also fail in practice when social workers' efforts break down due to unreliable family and community structures on which they rely (Edgar & Russell 1998). Finally, McKearney's (2020) study of people with intellectual disabilities argues that institutional support structures attempting to meet diverse needs may also fail if clients cannot engage in the ways expected by bureaucratic systems.

Studies also show how bureaucratised support frequently benefits only those who fit a narrow profile. Ticktin (2011) illustrates how compassion within the French immigration system is shaped by racialised, colonial logics, granting residency mainly to migrants with life-threatening illnesses and thereby creating a hierarchy of deservingness. Similarly, Koch (2018: 102) argues that support is offered only when women prove their 'abject victimhood'. Women Koch (2018) studied, view the system as coercive and unsupportive, and they attempt to circumvent the system to protect key relationships by hiding partners, working informally or using false addresses. They

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[56] See https://www.dwpjobs-eorecruitment
microsite.co.uk/role#:~:text=The%20Work%20Coach%20role%20is,job%2C%20or%20progress%20a%20career
(Accessed 5 August 2025)

exemplifying how bureaucratised support is conditional, impersonal, and underpins a carceral logic.

Although McNeil's (2009: 5) study promotes 'personalised support for everyone' in welfare-to-work schemes at jobcentres through signposting, it focuses on people with prior employment and fewer challenges. My study finds that while Jobcentre coaching was positioned as personalised, it was in fact standardised and inadequate for supporting my interlocutors, who were facing multiple disadvantages. Instead of helping, the coaches' approach often caused stress due to unrealistic expectations that ignored structural and personal barriers. In this context, so-called personalised support becomes another form of carceral escape in which women flee one constraint only to find themselves entrapped within another.

I shall now return to Irum to illustrate how the UC mandates and sanctions, underpinned by notions of autonomy, prove ineffective in her case during the early settlement stages.

When we left the meeting, Irum looked despondent because she could not attend the ESOL assessment alone. I wondered why she had not informed her work coach about her inability to travel. It may have been because she did not realize how far the classes were, or because she did not want to reveal her incapability to fulfil her Jobcentre Plus client commitment. Or, it may have been because she thought she would ask me, or perhaps she was scared to inform the coach of her poor competences. Luckily, I was not due to meet another interlocutor that day, so I offered to help her. At the college, with my help, Irum registered for an ESOL assessment. To Irum's disappointment, the college only provided classes after enough students had enrolled. The ESOL administrator estimated that the next class would take place in March-April 2019, nearly 6 months later.

At Irum's next Jobcentre appointment, we reported that there were no ESOL classes immediately available. Irum's work coach suggested that one way to learn English was to work. She said, 'What I mean is that you should chuck yourself into an environment where people only speak English'. Then, the work coach asked Irum if she had any friends who could help her find a job. Irum replied that she only had one friend, Aisha, with whom she lived. The work coach asked if Irum had worked before, and Irum answered, 'Never'. The work coach explained that Irum's language barrier was what was stopping her from finding employment – not health, children, or care-related duties – the work coach was unaware of Irum's true circumstances which she intentionally concealed, as discussed later on.

I could see that the UC rules (as mentioned above) determined how Irum's coach managed Irum's case. With no ESOL classes available, she expected Irum to find a job independently and learn English by immersing herself in an English-speaking environment. The coach did not consider Irum's poor capabilities and simply expected her to take responsibility for herself. This approach was linked to the welfare-to-work policies, which are based on an advanced form of liberalism, according to which responsibility is closely related to autonomy, and citizens must make choices that maximize their well-being, health, and quality of life (Juhila, Raitakari & Lofstrand 2017: 11-3). Irum wanted to learn English but required hands-on support at that stage to fulfil her commitment to the Jobcentre Plus coach – something not available to her.

Next, to further understand how the UK welfare system operates, I shall analyse the strategies employed by the DWP to facilitate the welfare-to-work approach at Jobcentre Plus.

Work coaches: Depersonalized care

This section examines the role and coaching style of Jobcentre Plus work coaches, which appear as supportive but in fact are coercive, underpinned by threats of sanctions. After this I examine the DWP's implementation of ESOL classes as a preparatory measure for employment and the sanctions that can follow.

The DWP website[57] states that, within the UK benefits system, the work coach is customer-focused, a good communicator, and has the ability to manage difficult cases. These coaches are vital in supporting people through difficult and challenging times. They must personalise their coaching to have a significant impact on individuals' ability to find and keep a job or advance in their career. The website states that work coaches must build positive relationships with customers by encouraging, motivating and building trust. This coaching approach is understood to make a difference to people's ability to find, maintain, and progress in a job. The DWP website further states that all Jobcentre Plus coaches can be contacted digitally, by phone or face-to-face. I would contend, however, that although these practices appear supportive, they are underpinned by the threat of sanctions. They instil fear in people who feel unable to meet their client commitments. These coaching approaches are inadequate for the demographic represented by my interlocutors. McNeil (2009: 5), who has authored a report on personal advisers within the UK benefits system, argues that a vital element of the benefits system is to provide 'personalized support for everyone', further indicating that advisors are pivotal to the success of welfare-to-work reforms. Interestingly, McNeil (2009: 7) recommends signposting as a means of promoting services that match the client's needs. McNeil (2009: 62) also suggests identifying skills and signposting clients to career services with a view to achieving a 'fuller diagnosis and support'. However, it is essential to note that the focus of this report was on people who signed onto benefits when they lost their jobs during the 2008 recession. While signposting would be a viable coaching tool for such clients, it would not be for the women in my study.

ESOL: inadequate provisions

Another approach to transitioning claimants from welfare to work is teaching them English. In April 2014, the DWP[58] mandated ESOL. ESOL is a requirement to prepare to enter the job market for those with English language speaking and listening skills below the expected ability of a seven-to-nine-year-old. This requirement aims to help benefit claimants learn English, be responsible, and do their utmost to find a job. Yet, the provision was inadequate as my cases reveal.

For example, in Irum's case, I suggest that her work coach understood Irum's poor capabilities. Yet, her work coach was neither using sound judgement nor tailoring her coaching to help Irum

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[57] See https://www.dwpjobs-eorecruitment-microsite.co.uk/role#:~:text=The%20Work%20Coach%20role%20is,job%2C%20or%20progress%20a%20career

[58] See https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/19774/1/ESOL_joint_DWP_SFA_note_and_QA.pdf

through her challenges. I witnessed her push Irum into 'responsibilisation' by persistently pointing her to English classes or asking her to learn through a job. Irum was aware of her poor language and digital capabilities, and a toxic dynamic with Aisha, which held her in domestic work. Consequently, her coach's persistent signposts increased Irum's stress. In my case, the women wanted to improve their English, but ESOL provision was inadequate. Yet, coaches repeatedly signposted regardless of difficulties finding, registering, and attending ESOL classes[59]. For example, Farah struggled with ESOL classes and with Razia's help, she found a class at a local women's charity, which she attended regularly. Irum travelled over an hour each way to learn English at the same local women's charity as Farah after my introduction. As you will hear next, although ESOL is mandated, access is limited – Fatima had to wait nine months to begin her classes.

In Fatima's case, I witnessed how intent her work coach was on getting her into work and off benefits. Fatima explained that she did not wish to simply secure 'any' low-paid job; she wanted a 'good job', and she wanted the Jobcentre to refer her to ESOL classes. Her work coach became annoyed. He claimed that, as he could understand her, Fatima's English was good enough, and that she therefore needed to look for a job. Fatima showed him a letter from an agency that placed people in social care jobs. It clearly stated that getting a job was contingent on improved English capabilities. Fatima explained that she wanted that job because she had cared for hard-of-hearing children back home and had some skills in sign language. Finally, her work coach agreed. Following McNeil (2009: 17-8), I contend that this standardized welfare-to-work approach prioritizes job placement and conflicts with client-centred ethics.

A few months later, Fatima found some free sign language lessons at a local charity through her networks at a local food bank where she was volunteering. Fatima attended the lessons 2 days a week for 8 weeks. She explained that because she was passionate about this kind of work, she did not mind starting at the bottom of the professional ladder and working her way up. After receiving training and improving her English, she hoped that she would be able to find work in this field. Nine months after receiving her ILR, she started ESOL classes in a college in the neighbouring town. I found that Fatima was more proactive because she was less emotionally challenged than others in my study, and she had a distant cousin in the United Kingdom, from whom she felt comfortable seeking support. Moreover, she had some past work experience. I believe that Fatima's Jobcentre work coach was working in accordance with a standardized 'work first' (McNeil 2009: 17-8) approach to nudge active citizenship (in this case, to ESOL classes and then employment). The approach they adopted was not 'individually tailored' or based on a 'person-centred empathetic attitude', as stated on the UC website.

Mandates and sanctions: Increasing fear and stress

Another issue with the claimant-work coach relationship is the stress and fear of sanctions to their benefits that my interlocutors experienced. They feared receiving sanctions if they did not follow

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[59] See https://www.dwpjobs-eorecruitment-microsite.co.uk/role#:~:text=We%20are%20looking%20for%20someone%20who%20is%20a%20good%20listener,judgement%20and%20objective%2C%20analytical%20thinking. (Accessed 19 April 2025)

their coaches' directives. For instance, as I shall explore now, Irum remained silent about her personal issues to avoid sanctions, which caused her stress, while Bilquis' work coach signposted her to classes that were unsuitable for her, which she attended out of fear, negatively impacting her confidence.

Studies highlight that customer sovereignty is common at Jobcentres, and that customer violence can go unnoticed (Bishop Korczynski & Cohen 2005: 586). I observed the opposite. The women in my study were very compliant with their coaches' directives. However, McNeil (2009: 66) points out that advisers can sanction clients who do not comply. Using Irum's and Bilquis' case studies, I shall show how the women withheld the challenges they experienced in the transition from welfare to work from their Jobcentre work coaches. For Irum, this caused stress, while Bilquis felt it was a waste of her time and had a negative impact on her confidence[60]. Both women felt they had escaped from one set of carceral conditions into another set of carceral circumstances. I shall begin with Irum.

Irum's work coach observed her lack of capabilities to find her ESOL classes. However, unbeknown to her work coach, Irum was also tied to Aisha's daily demands to undertake cooking, caring, and babysitting duties. Aisha did not support Irum's attempts to learn English or find voluntary work. Her standard response was aggressive, asserting she could not understand why Irum wanted to engage in these activities and ignored Irum's Jobcentre mandates. Moreover, Irum always cared for Aisha's baby, whom she took everywhere with her. Irum did not know how to disengage from these duties to fulfil her Jobcentre client commitments. However, each time that I attended one of Irum's Jobcentre Plus appointments with her, I noticed that she did not share her predicaments with her work coach because she needed her benefits. She nonetheless worried constantly about not attending English classes, regularly asking if I thought her benefits would be suspended. I did not know, of course, but I tried to assuage her fears. As Wright (2003) argues, policies shape, constrain, and incentivize the frontline workers tasked with implementing them. In addition, service users are managed by frontline staff and often lack choice or power. My interlocutors were willing but unable to do what was required. In those early days, the sanctions remained a constant source of stress for them.

Similarly, as I shall explain next, Bilquis diligently attended all the courses to which her work coach directed her, even when they were incompatible with her needs. When I met Bilquis in November 2018, she explained that the courses she had attended under her coach's instruction had not increased her skills or confidence. She had completed an employability course, for example, and was currently completing a 6-day customer services course spread over 3 weeks. Neither of these courses proved helpful, however. Instead, the classes left Bilquis feeling nervous and stressed because the teacher spoke very fast, and all the students spoke fluent English, both with the teacher and with each other. Bilquis explained that she forced herself to appear interested and to give the impression that she understood everything. The truth was that she did not understand the course content but lacked the confidence needed to seek clarifications from the teacher or help from her

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[60] http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/40426-Jobseekers-web.pdf (Accessed 25 August 2025) Welfare conditionality, delivered through sanctions and mandatory appointments, fostered fear, injustice, and compliance with meaningless activities, as jobseekers faced minimal support, poor-quality services, and disproportionate or unclear punishments.

colleagues. Bilquis was also scared of appearing stupid. She failed her end-of-course tests twice, before finally passing the exams on her third attempt. In contrast, Bilquis felt like a good student in her ESOL classes because her teacher spoke simply and slowly. In their study, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) examine the role of support in the performance outcomes of 100 ethnic minority college students, suggesting that while research highlights the positive impact support has on educational outcomes, their findings indicate that the *lack* of peer support is a more robust indicator of student outcomes than positive family support. Bilquis lacked both forms of support.

Bilquis explained that her challenges extended beyond job-readiness. She attributed her difficulties to her past carceral experiences. She explained that she suffered from low moods owing to negative thoughts about her past abusive marital relationship, the stress of fighting her asylum case, and prolonged periods of inactivity at home with nothing to do, experiences of homelessness, and the absence of family connections in the United Kingdom and back home. Moreover, she only slept around five hours a night, which contributed to her physical weakness, tiredness, and poor concentration. Frustratedly, Bilquis explained that she could not retain knowledge because 'her brain could not think'. Her condition highlights the lamination of several adverse life events. I felt sad for her. Her symptoms pointed to poor mental health brought about by the compounding stress of migration, loneliness, and the loss of social connections, which aligns with Ahmed *et al.*'s (2004) observation about the emotional toll of displacement. Moreover, as can be seen in Bilquis' case, research has confirmed the relationship between unemployment and poor mental health (for a review, see Virgolino, Costa, Santos, Pereira, Antunes, Ambrósio & Heitor 2022). The welfare-to-work policy is intended to achieve economic outcomes by pushing individuals into employment. However, Bilquis' example underscores the social and emotional effects of unemployment, living alone, and their relationship with health and well-being. While attending courses aimed at employment readiness, Bilquis' was plagued by poor mental health.

Bilquis also realized that her lack of confidence was a significant issue. She needed to improve her written English and practise speaking English with non-South Asian people, especially individuals with English accents. As detailed above, the UC website states that it provides a personalized approach to labour-market activity. In Bilquis' case, however, although she attended these courses to comply with her work coach's directive, they were unsuitable and unbeneficial, ultimately having a negative effect on her self-confidence. The women in my study would generally never upset their work coaches for fear of their benefits being suspended.

So far, I have examined some lived experiences of the welfare-to-work policy exercised through a 'one-size-fits-all' administrative service and the challenges of desk-based coaching through signposting for individuals in the early settlement phase with poor language and digital skills and little know-how of life in the United Kingdom. I have also discussed the mandates and sanctions underpinning the benefits system, the stress associated with the 'responsibilization' approach, and the unproductive nature of a standardized 'work first' (McNeil 2009: 17-8) approach, which lack an empathetic person-centred attitude. My findings align with the observation of the Work and Pensions Secretary, Liz Kendall,[61] who described the Jobcentres as a 'one-size-fits-all benefit

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[61] See https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/nov/24/uk-jobcentres-not-fit-for-purpose-says-liz-kendall-ahead-of-major-

administration service' that is 'not fit for purpose'. Although her comments specifically addressed employers and young people, I believe they are applicable to all benefits claimants. In the face of such bureaucratized care, women's journeys of self-becoming encompass several stressful events, struggles, fears, and forms of resilience as they 'keep going' on their path from welfare to work, negotiating carceral escapes, from one set of constraints into another, while settling into life as single women in the United Kingdom.

Welfare to Work: An Unpredictable, Non-linear Pathway

Using Bilquis' and Irum's cases, I shall now illustrate that, contrary to the Jobcentre work coaches' signposting approach to securing work, finding jobs is not a straightforward, linear process, where one step seamlessly leads to the next. This unpredictability challenges policy assumptions that frame welfare-to-work programmes as standardized, sequential pathways to employment.

The challenges of securing employment: Low confidence and inadequate work experience and language skills

First, through Bilquis' case, I shall demonstrate how acquiring English-language skills, undertaking job-readiness courses, preparing a CV, and securing a job are frustrating processes that do not guarantee paid employment.

After Bilquis had completed the courses her coach organized for her, she then needed to prepare her CV and look for jobs. It was around this time that she joined my research project. Bilquis was experiencing low confidence and poor mental health. She did not know how to write a CV. Furthermore, with an Urdu medium college degree from Pakistan and some part-time job experience working in a family-run bakery, she felt she had very little to include in her CV. With my help and after a further redraft with the assistance of a local charity, Bilquis' CV was ready. I printed out several copies and Bilquis immediately distributed them to shops in her area, but to no avail. Frustrated, Bilquis realized that distributing her CV to local shops was a pointless task. Bilquis' work coach signposted her to the local Job Shop – a local authority support service for finding jobs.[62] I emailed Bilquis a PDF copy of her CV, which she forwarded to Simon, the representative at her local Job Shop. Simon then emailed Bilquis several links for online job applications. However, Bilquis did not have sufficient language or digital skills to apply for jobs online. Giving me a despondent look, Bilquis said, 'The only way to get a good job is through

reforms?utm_term=6742d2762a615db91c2531e155f394a4&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK&utm_source=esp &utm_medium=Email&CMP=GTUK_email. (Accessed 27 November 2024).

[62] To find work, benefits claimants can email the Jobcentre Plus rapid response team https://www.gov.uk/guidance/redundancy-help-finding-work-and-claiming-benefits#help-finding-work-and-training for help with CVs, training, learning new skills, and organizing work trials. People can also seek career advice and training and learn how to build skills through voluntary work. They can also go to the JobHelp website https://jobhelp.campaign.gov.uk/improve-your-chances-of-getting-a-job/ to access third-party assistance to navigate from welfare to work. Such forms of state ordering are ways to further build responsibility in people. However, owing to her poor confidence in her skills and language capabilities, Bilquis did not reach out to these services for support. (Accessed 30 November 2024)

online applications'. As I shall explore in the next section, I knew that it would take several online applications before she was shortlisted, passed an interview, and got a job.

Barriers to employment: Limited capabilities and low self-confidence

Bilquis said she was unable to make online job applications. Observing her despondency, I asked if she would like my help, and she gratefully accepted. I arrived early the following morning with my laptop. We sat on the floor of her bedsit and worked our way through the links to jobs at local supermarkets, DIY shops, and general stores, which Simon had emailed Bilquis. I was surprised by the high-level questions on the application forms. For example, there were situational questions about how Bilquis would deal with specific scenarios at work, questions about her personality requiring multiple-choice answers, maths questions, and questions about herself and her hobbies. Most applications had 10-20 questions in each section, using advanced language as if they were recruiting for a more high-level job rather than for the shop floor in a local supermarket. At one point, Bilquis laughed and said my answers sounded more like me than her. She was right. I had filled in the answers as if I were applying for the jobs myself.

I was astonished to see all the applications rejected. I wondered how someone like me, with a business background and experience in hotel and property management, had failed to successfully apply for a shopfloor job at a local supermarket. After a long day of failed online applications, my back hurt and my eyes were sore. I also felt discouraged and disappointed. For many of the online applications, if she received a rejection, Bilquis was restricted from reapplying to the same store for a year. I wondered how Bilquis felt. She did not give much away and said that she was okay. That week, I spent another day filling out online applications, with no success. During this process, we experienced freezing application links, reaching the final application level, and many rejections. Owing to the high volume of applications, we did not receive any feedback about the reasons for the rejections. We had two successes, but they were jobs in very faraway locations. Overall, the job application process proved laborious, resulting in backaches, sore eyes, and deflated enthusiasm.

Bilquis finally received an initial phone interview for a job in the neighbouring borough. She was very excited, as was I. However, once someone has applied for a job, they must actively assume responsibility for their employability. They are expected to work on themselves to improve their appeal to the labour market, but often without knowing exactly how (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013: 826). I wondered how Bilquis planned to prepare for her interview. When I asked her, she said, 'I don't know, can you help me?'. Curious to discover a side to her that I had not yet seen, I agreed to train her for the interview and conducted a mock interview. Although it was understandable, her spoken English had grammatical errors, and she had a heavy accent. Bilquis also appeared nervous. Bilquis received a face-to-face interview invitation. Delighted to have got through to the second round of the job application process, she immediately turned to me for help. Together, we chose her clothes and studied the store's website to prepare for her interview.

However, Bilquis did not go to the interview. When I asked her why, she replied, '*Baji,* I feel a fear inside me. Sometimes it stops me from trying to find jobs'. She said she suffered from bouts of self-doubt. Boland (2016: 347) contends that interviews and CVs are staged performances where people must present themselves as enterprising and marketable, offering skills that people want.

In a quasi-theatrical labour market, where a job seeker's value is judged by their performance, failure is viewed as a personal shortcoming. Bilquis explained the emotional difficulties she experienced while navigating this phase. She said that owing to her lack of work experience, poor spoken English, and inadequate digital skills, she lacked the confidence to attend the interview, speak in English, put herself out there, and face failure. I have observed this fear of failure in my children, as well as the emotional challenges of lengthy job applications and the poor success rates. I have coached them to face and overcome their fears and reassured them through positive reinforcement. Although it is not always practical and is often emotionally draining, I adopt this approach with my interlocutors from time to time. Research on South Asian migrant and second-generation UK-born women indicates that they struggle because they are conflicted between caring duties and economic independence (Dale *et al.* 2002; Tariq & Syed 2017: 512). In contrast, Bilquis' case shows how young females who have migrated to the United Kingdom struggle with employment owing to poor skills, mental health issues, and low confidence.

Next, I shall demonstrate how frustrations caused by complex job application processes, the need for work experience to build confidence and get a job, and pursuing financial independence contributed to these women's ethical dilemmas.

Employment Challenges: Navigating Ethical Dilemmas

The next time we met, I submitted several more online applications with no positive results. Bilquis was disappointed. She explained that Mina, the vice-chairperson of the foodbank charity '*Madat*', where she volunteered every Saturday, had recommended that she apply for an administrative job at a local hospital. Looking wary, Bilquis said, '*Baji,* it is to you alone that I can openly say that I don't know what it means to do an admin job in a hospital'. Bilquis also tried to get a job through a friend whose brother-in-law ran a money exchange shop. She went for an interview but was underqualified and did not get the job. Restricted access to social networks for job searches can also hinder progress in the job market. In some cases, local centres can provide community activities and opportunities for employability (Lindsay 2009; Sharabi & Simonovich 2019). When positioned within racialized social hierarchies, having the right networks can support employability (Olliff, Baak, Braddeley, Lino, Lejukole, Munyonge, Saidi & Treuren 2022). However, Bilquis was reluctant to reveal her limited skills to her social networks, which rendered these networks ineffective in supporting her employability.

Feeling tired and disappointed, Bilquis and I sat down for a cup of tea. Looking down into her teacup, Bilquis said, in a thoughtful tone, that she had received an offer through a friend for an interview for a 'cash-in-hand' job at a fast-food outlet – Yum.[63] The manager did not require a CV, job experience, or English skills. Although Bilquis knew the position was illegal, she wanted the money. She therefore faced an ethical dilemma. In a hesitant voice, she said, '*Baji,* it is tough to survive living on benefits. I know this is illegal, but I need extra money. What shall I do? Shall I take this job?' (Koch 2018 presents similar cases). Faced with such a difficult question, I felt very uncomfortable. While the online applications were challenging, they were more straightforward than this question. I decided to remain silent. I waited for Bilquis to continue with her thoughts

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[63] A pseudonym.

on her own. Bilquis looked at me with a broken smile and said, in a sad tone, 'Sometimes I feel I have lost opportunities' (by this, she meant missing out on a UK university education because, after her father passed away, she was left penniless and could not pay the fees). I understood because I had seen the university's correspondence on the matter. Just before we parted company that day, Bilquis asked again if I thought she should take the 'cash-in-hand' job. And once again, feeling as though my back was against a wall, I said, 'Bilquis, why don't you think about it?'.

Bilquis called me the following day. She explained her thoughts on taking the cash-in-hand job. She said she felt she wanted to carry on applying for 'proper' jobs. In addition to the legal issues, she thought it would be wrong because it would be cheating the system. She also worried that the job was far away. However, Bilquis calculated that if she worked 8 hours daily and earned £6.50 per hour, her daily income would amount to £45 after her travel costs, which would considerably relieve her financial burden. On that basis, still unsure but desperate for money, Bilquis decided to attend the job interview. She explained that she felt nervous. She was worried that she would renege again like she had for her last job interview. Bilquis said, '*Baji*, I need this job. Do you think they will reject me because I have no experience? I am scared they will not like me; I need '*himmat*' (strength) to do this interview'. Then she requested that I accompany her, and I agreed.

Through the following vignette, I shall illustrate how first-time job interviews can be emotionally taxing and marked by stress, low self-confidence, and a fear of rejection.

First-time job interview: Navigating stress, low confidence, and fear

On the train the following day, Bilquis was riddled with doubts. She looked to me for reassurance that she would be OK during the interview, saying that she was feeling a little scared. Although Bilquis was happy to work hard, she did not feel she would be able to handle the stress of her colleagues being rude or unkind. Bilquis explained that she had had to deal with her various (re)positions, from a college graduate to a wife, a victim of abuse, a homeless person, and, finally, a refugee on benefits. She explained that she had had to work hard to overcome her negative thoughts and low confidence. Although she believed she could succeed at this job, the voice inside her head was constantly filling her with unhelpful doubts. Bilquis said that she also could not shake off the ethical dilemma she faced. She worried that it would be wrong to take this job, feeling that the right thing to do would be to look for a 'proper' job. I spent the journey positively reassuring her, expressing my belief in her, and guiding her to list all her good qualities and draw strength from them.

We met the manager at the fast-food restaurant and then went to a nearby coffee shop, where Bilquis and the manager spoke for more than 30 minutes. The manager explained that she understood Bilquis' situation because she had faced similar struggles in the United Kingdom herself. She wanted to give Bilquis a start in life and was happy with how the interview had gone. Bilquis could start immediately and would receive on-the-job training. Depending on how quickly Bilquis learnt, she would be offered as many 8-hour shifts as she wanted. I was very uncomfortable with Bilquis' cash-in-hand job, which had no contract. Luckily, though, I was not directly involved

in her decision-making process. Overjoyed, she hugged me and thanked me for my support. I left feeling tired and washed out.

Although Bilquis now had her much-desired job, she faced poor working conditions and emotional turmoil and struggled to sustain it.

Challenges at work: Poor management and emotional strife

Unfortunately, Bilquis found her job challenging. I regularly met her after work to document her work experiences and witnessed her unhappiness. She often lamented that the stress was negatively affecting her mental health. Physically, her diabetes had worsened, and she felt exhausted. During the course of several visits, I listened to Bilquis' feelings and coached her on finding ways to cope with her work-related stress. I observed that sharing her thoughts and challenges with me helped Bilquis process the challenges she had faced that day. I constantly reminded Bilquis that her issues were a result of the poor job conditions and not her capabilities. Listening to Bilquis, I understood that the job was challenging because she had received inadequate training. Within the first week, she was charged with opening and managing the store singlehandedly for the first hour in the morning. As a trainee worker, Bilquis found this hard. In addition, one work colleague was always rude, and Bilquis received no support from her manager. During her shifts, Bilquis was not allowed to take breaks which, as a person with diabetes, was hard to manage.

Although her manager had agreed to offer Bilquis regular 8-hour shifts at her job interview, this did not materialize. In reality, she often worked only 3-4 hours a day, making the job financially unviable owing to her high travel costs. Another issue was delayed wage payments, which Bilquis was embarrassed to request. Unfortunately, her manager was indifferent to her issues, and they got into regular arguments. As I was often with Bilquis when her manager called, I witnessed these exchanges. I observed how Bilquis' manager forced her to come to work at short notice and for a few hours per day, never accepting 'no' for an answer. Bilquis often had to work on Saturdays, the day on which she volunteered at *Madat,* the local charity, which led to disagreements with the charity's management team.

Without notice, Bilquis's work would frequently overrun. While I waited for Bilquis inside the shop, I observed that the fast-food outlet was understaffed, but I also saw that Bilquis was confident in her job. The manager appeared to be reducing the staffing hours to manage wage costs. My suspicions were confirmed when I called a friend who ran a similar shop – he confirmed that his staff numbers were higher. I believe that Bilquis was working in an unprofessionally managed work environment, where she was expected to accept requests to work ad hoc hours without complaint. Owing to her lack of work experience, professional training, and experience with human resources practices, it was difficult for Bilquis to manage the work dynamic. Notwithstanding these issues, over time, Bilquis' confidence increased. She learnt to deal with customers, manage external inspections, and build good relationships with her work colleagues, albeit not with her manager.

After nearly 10 months, Bilquis handed in her notice, citing her manager's negative attitude as her main reason. When I next met Bilquis, I asked her how she felt about leaving. With a mixed

expression, she admitted that she had cried when she got home. She said her colleagues often advised her to ignore the manager, which she found challenging. I gently remarked that she had probably learnt a lot from the job. She agreed. She said she felt happy that, by the time she left her job, she could confidently speak English with customers and understand people's accents, operate the cash till, open the store singlehandedly, and navigate external shop inspections without fear. Through this cash-in-hand job, she had developed her work-related skills and improved her overall self-confidence.

Bilquis explained that, after the many challenges she had faced in life, this job was a way for her to test her physical and emotional capacities. This experience had not just been about the money. She acknowledged that the job had helped her grow, equipping her with resilience and emotional capabilities. Although the job came with 'a lot of headaches', Bilquis now believed she could hold down a job. Smiling, I reached across to her and gave her arm a warm, reassuring squeeze. Around the same time, Bilquis' job coach referred her to a work brokerage. More confident than before, Bilquis was offered a part-time job on a short-term contract in a large store. She told me that she felt confident at work and that she had found it easy to adapt to the role. She attributed this to what she had learnt at the fast-food shop.

Without the experience of the cash-in-hand job, Bilquis believed that she might not have been able to successfully navigate this job application or the role itself. What initially felt like a carceral experience from which she had escaped ultimately enabled her to secure better employment. Bilquis now earns over £18,600 annually and has sponsored her husband to travel on a marriage visa. She also sends small financial gifts to her sister, with whom she has reconnected, and donates small sums to charity. Reestablishing herself as a married woman and having economic independence has provided Bilquis with new forms of social standing, which she had previously lost.

In contrast, through Irum's case, I shall now explore how voluntary work can also be a means to positive work experiences.

Gaining work experiences through volunteering

After Irum had freed herself from Aisha's control, I introduced her to the English classes that Farah attended. Her English quickly improved, and she began to travel around her local area confidently. I also suggested that Irum consider volunteering at a local charity shop. The idea appealed to her, and with my support, she applied for a role at a local charity shop, which she was offered. When I next met Irum, she explained that the charity shop manager worked very hard and expected the same level of commitment from others. Her manager spent time teaching Irum various aspects of the work on a one-to-one basis. Although she found it demanding, Irum was now proficient at sorting and labelling clothes. I was surprised to hear that something so simple was challenging for her, but I continued to listen. Irum explained that she had progressed quickly and had moved to work on the shop floor. She initially found working at the till hard, but, thanks to her manager's help, she could now efficiently work the cash till. Irum felt that this training had improved her confidence and her English-language skills. As I listened, I realized that perhaps learning is a lengthier process for people like Irum.

Irum felt ready to take the next step. She wanted to work in another charity shop and develop her skills by experiencing a different work environment. We found another shop and Irum completed the registration form with very little help from me.[64] Throughout this time, Irum's primary concern was that her work was voluntary and unpaid – she only received £6 per shift for travel and food. Despite Irum's positive voluntary work experiences and increased confidence, however, these did not translate into paid employment. Instead, she was pushed too quickly into a job without adequate language, digital and work skills.

The inadequacy of ESOL attendance and voluntary work experience for securing paid employment

Nine months after registering for ESOL, Irum completed her pre-ESOL level course. Soon after, her Jobcentre work coach wanted her to start paid work, which was also Irum's goal. Her work coach therefore referred her to her local borough's Employer and Skills Brokerage Office – a form of outsourcing designed to manage the tension between dealing with unemployment and offering an individualized service (McNeil 2019: 35). There, Irum met Tamira (Irum described her as a Punjabi-speaking Asian in her early forties), who arranged an appointment for Irum to interview for a caregiver's job. Given her poor travel competencies, Irum checked the address of her interview the day before but still got lost. She called me to explain what had happened. I was curious to know who had offered her a job caring for adults when Irum was under 25 years of age and had no experience or training in caregiving. I therefore offered to go with her.

A woman greeted us at the door and directed us to a top-floor room. I immediately felt uneasy. The building was a residential property – a six-bedroom house functioning as an HMO occupied by clients. The woman at the door was a caregiver. At the top of the stairs was a makeshift office for the manager, Peter, who explained that his organization provided care services for people in their houses and HMOs. Irum would make home visits to care for his clients. Peter explained that he would email Irum on a daily basis to provide her with the details of the clients she needed to visit. Then, Peter asked Irum for her email address. Irum took a small piece of paper with her email address written on it and handed it to Peter. She then explained that she did not know how to send or receive emails. He brushed past this crucial concern and said that Irum would receive on-the-job training and earn £8 per hour. However, given her lack of digital skills, I could not help but wonder how Peter would communicate with her. Peter's attitude and his offer of a caregiving role to someone as young and inexperienced as Irum – who had limited English and no digital skills – made me feel deeply uncomfortable. I also questioned why Tamira had referred Irum to this job and how thoroughly she had assessed Irum's readiness and abilities to undertake it.

On Irum's first day of work, I accessed her emails to get her client's address. Later that morning, Irum called me in tears and said the job was tough. She left terrified after providing personal care to her client, a massive man with mental health challenges. Distressed, Irum called Tamira to inform her that she would not continue with the job. Tamira was very angry with Irum because

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[64] Unlike this time, when Irum filled out her first ESOL and voluntary job registration form, I wrote down every word on a separate piece of paper, which she copied.

she had paid for Irum's Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)[65] check once Irum had agreed to take the job. Irum never returned to the role. The incident had shaken her self-confidence. Over the next few weeks, Tamira persistently signed Irum up for various training courses, CV writing sessions, and paid positions, which Irum felt unqualified to undertake. On one occasion, I overheard a conversation in which Tamira repeatedly pressured Irum to attend a course even though she explained that she was not ready for it. Irum found Tamira's forcefulness very stressful and stopped answering her calls. Work coaches are supposed to use sound judgement to help people get through difficult times by tailoring their coaching to the individual (McNeil 2009). Such a person-centred coaching approach was clearly lacking in Irum's case, exacerbating her distress, negatively affecting her confidence, and hampering her progress from welfare to work.

Volunteering: A pathway with mixed outcomes

Irum moved back into a woman's refuge and never transitioned into paid work. The refuge introduced her to a volunteering role in a bakery that offers one-on-one mentoring to women. Irum thrived in this role, which involved working in the kitchen, serving customers, and managing the till. In Irum's case, although the voluntary setting allowed her to improve her skills, her lack of capabilities and mental health issues prevented her from pursuing paid employment. Irum now receives PIP.[66] With the extra money, Irum contributes to her mother's medical care in Pakistan. She feels that making a financial contribution in this way has helped her regain the self-respect she lost after leaving her marriage and being disowned by her family. However, she worries that if she stops contributing, she will lose this once again as her family see her as the daughter who broke her marriage and brought disgrace upon them.

I shall now turn to Bilquis, who volunteered at *'Madat'* – an unregistered charity established by Asian women volunteers – to counter her loneliness, build social connections, and increase her work experience. However, her co-volunteers, mainly middle-to-upper-middle-class women, treated her disparagingly. Some women viewed her as a 'poor refugee', while others saw her as an unmarried woman living alone and treated her with disdain. These women sometimes made derogatory remarks, which management brushed off as inconsequential. Moreover, the manager became annoyed when Bilquis missed her volunteering owing to paid work commitments. Their behaviours and attitudes upset Bilquis. After volunteering there for over a year, Bilquis left and disconnected from the community of women she had got to know. Some members of the management team were helpful, such as when she was ill or when they invited her to their home for Eid celebrations, but they would not address her work issues. In Bilquis' view, the management team was unwilling to upset the other volunteers because of their higher social position.

Although volunteering is intended to help individuals develop their skills, networks, work experience, and references, with a view to promoting employment (Allan 2019: 71), Bilquis primarily joined the charity to make social connections and, later, to gain work experience. Discursive practices and structural processes in mainstream charities can perpetuate refugees' outsider status (Tomlinson 2010). However, in Bilquis' case, she was discriminated against by

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[65] A DBS check to get a copy of your criminal record.
[66] See https://www.gov.uk/pip

people from her own ethnic community. In addition, as Bilquis subsequently realized, joining this group, where people only spoke Urdu and her interactions with clients were minimal, did not provide her with an opportunity to improve her English, which was a significant barrier to her employment prospects. Nonetheless, she learnt how food banks are organized and managed. A study of migrant women's volunteering in the Netherlands indicates that volunteering does improve language and skills and helps migrants envision themselves in paid work, but it does not always boost employability.[67] In my study, although Irum had positive volunteering experiences, Bilquis did not. However, volunteering did not directly lead to paid work for either of the women.

As I accompanied my interlocutors on their journeys from welfare to work and witnessed the dynamics of self-becoming, I observed that this process was non-linear, lengthy, and fraught with practical and emotional challenges. These challenges stemmed from these women's past carceral experiences, limited capabilities, and low confidence, all of which require practical and emotional support. My case studies illustrate that for some women in this demographic, the transition from welfare to work is a complex dynamic shaped by factors such as language and digital skills, mental health challenges, work experience, and self-confidence. These multiple, intertwining, positive, and challenging experiences shape their ongoing process of self-becoming in a compounding, non-linear way towards resilience and progressive settlement.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that in many ways my interlocutors experienced the welfare state as carceral. The UK welfare state is underpinned by a carceral logic in which the benefits system operates as a form of governmentality, shifting responsibility onto individuals through moral discourses of self-reliance (Barnett 2003; Rose 2000; Peeters 2013). Under UC, benefit entitlement is conditional and enforced through sanctions and benefit suspensions (Dwyer 2010), often excluding vulnerable people from social citizenship (Reeves & Loopstra 2016). While policymakers claim sanctions promote employment and well-being (DWP, 2011, 2018b), they instead produce surveillance and constraints, leading to anxiety, stress, avoidance, reluctant compliance, or informal resistance (Davey & Koch 2021). The DWP presents work coaches as supportive, client-focused, and offering personalised guidance to support people into employment. However, drawing on the concept of bureaucratic care – a dialectic between humanistic values and bureaucratic imperatives (Turkel 2007: 58), my research reveals a rigid, standardised, sanction-driven system shaped by bureaucratised support through Jobcentre work coaches, underpinned by a carceral logic. For my interlocutors, escaping deportation led them to another form of entrapment within the welfare state, exemplifying how carceral escapes don't necessarily resolve conditions of control, they often overlooking individual needs and producing uneven outcomes.

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[67] Saira, Irum, Bilquis, Shazia, Fatima, and Lubna volunteered but did not report any negative experiences. While volunteering did not lead to paid employment, it nonetheless helped the women to gain confidence and language skills and pass time during their long-awaited ruling for rights to remain in the United Kingdom. While working at the national refugee centre, I learned about Starbucks' refugee training and employment initiative: see https://archive.starbucks.com/record/hiring-refugees.The women in my study were not ready to apply for such training opportunities. (Accessed 2 December 2024)

Though the benefits system claims to empower through employment, Irum's, Bilquis' and Fatima's experiences reveal a different reality: one of standardised demands and sanctions that induce stress, insecurities, and emotional strain. The process followed by Jobcentre work coaches overlooked the specific barriers my interlocutors face, such as limited language, digital skills, and work experience. I show how Bilquis accepted illegal work out of financial need, highlighting the ethical dilemmas she faced. This example reveals how people subvert the system to meet every day needs, guided by care and survival rather than policy rules – a pattern also evident in Koch's (2018) study.

This chapter also shows that the expectations for a seamless shift from welfare to work overlooks the realities of the women I studied, whose carceral experiences limited their ability to develop work-related skills. As Appadurai (2004) argues, imagining the future is a form of navigational capacity – one more accessible to the privileged. When people face structural disadvantages, they have limited opportunities that narrow their future horizons. Using Bilquis and Irum's cases, I showed how, although volunteering increased their confidence, their limited capacities meant they could not develop sufficient skills to translate into paid employment. Bilquis eventually gained paid work after gaining work experience in a cash-in-hand job.

These findings challenge the assumptions that welfare-to-work programmes are universally effective, highlighting instead the need for flexible, person-centred support. The DWP's 2007 Partners Outreach for Ethnic Minority (POEM) pilot aimed at Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Somali women, demonstrates this. It offered one-to-one guidance, language training, childcare, and culturally sensitive support from multilingual staff. This approach, built on trust, addressed barriers, and helped participants gain confidence and clarify goals – meeting 80% of its targets (Aston, Bellis, Munro, Pillai & Willison 2009: 163). Unlike standardised services, POEM shows the potential of tailored interventions.

For my interlocutors, the welfare system became a carceral escape – not through incarceration but through conditionality, sanctions, and the threat of benefits withdrawal. Although the system claims to offer personalised support, my interlocutors experienced it as punitive, impersonal, and bureaucratically structured often feeling coercive and moralising (Koch, 2018; Ticktin, 2011), causing stress, worries and anxiety. My study shows that women's pathways from welfare-to-work were varied. Saira, despite her education, struggled with mental health and could not work. She gradually moved to volunteering in a low-pressured environment. Here, she developed confidence in her physical capability, mental resilience, and social networks. These experiences led to a part-time paid position and, eventually, to a full-time job in a medical centre. In contrast, Shazia chose to volunteer. She said it helped her stay busy and eased her anxiety. After moving from the YMCA to an HMO, Shazia felt more settled and took up work as a kitchen helper procured through her GP's referral. She quit this job to concentrate on her GSCES. However, following a toxic relationship, her mental health declined. She is now on PIP and seeking voluntary work.

Farah improved her English but never entered paid work due to family pressure to remarry. Razia worked at a Bangladeshi clothes store, where her limited English was not a barrier to work. She remarried and applied for her husband's spousal visa to allow him to come to the United Kingdom. At first, Lubna tried to work on a cash-in-hand basis, this did not work out. She then spent many

years volunteering as a chef for a charity and undertaking ad hoc cash-in-hand jobs such as teaching art and babysitting. After receiving her ILR, she secured part-time employment as a chef for a catering company. When I last met Fatima, she was awaiting hospital treatment for a heart condition. Some women have secured paid employment, while others have not.

Ultimately, my interlocutors' welfare to work experiences underscore how their carceral escapes unfold across multiple domains, where the punitive logic of deportation enforcement gave way to the punitive logic of welfare conditionality. In this sense, women found themselves moving from one system of control into another, in which they struggled and reached varied outcomes.

In Chapter Seven, my final substantive chapter, I shall examine my interlocutors' narratives of forbearance – *sabar*, the development of their *sabar* subjectivities, and the role of *sabar* in helping them navigate the harsh, restrictive challenges women face alone in a foreign country. I shall consider *sabar*'s role in how my interlocutors 'keep going' through carceral escapes and multiple moral dilemmas the influence of structural conditions and interpersonal dynamics on their capacities for and possibilities of *sabar*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CARCERLITY AND THE EVERYDAY – THE CAPACITY FOR *SABAR*

Farah's *Sabar* Practices

Farah told me that she never wanted her marriage to fail, explaining, *'Maine bohot sabar rakha'* ('I exercised a lot of forbearance) throughout it. When I asked her where she got the strength to stay in her marriage, she said that she performed her *'namaz'* (prayers) daily, keeping her trust and faith in Allah. Farah explained that even if she felt alone, tearful, despondent, and in a low mood at times, she had to trust Allah. She told me that she had been concerned about her marriage from the very start; so, when she came to this country, she kept a *'mannat'* (a vow in return for a hoped-for outcome or desire to come true) to fast for 21 days to maintain her *sabar* disposition. The *mannat* was to seek Allah's directions to help her make good decisions in the face of her marital challenges. She also recited *'la ilaha illa anta subhanaka inni kuntu minaz-zalimi'* – a *'tasbih'* (repetitive prayer) – for twenty to thirty minutes every day. She said that it felt good to pray because it gave her a sense of *'shanti'* (peace) and helped her maintain her *sabar*. She believed that, if she did not pray, she could not have *shanti* in her heart. Farah also fasted during Ramadan. When she spoke to her family (her husband controlled her telephone usage), her mother consoled her and counselled her to have *sabar*, reassuring her that Allah would reward her for her forbearance. I could sense that her capacity for *sabar* was not only a feature of Islamic piety, which instils in people the idea that God is with those who exercise tolerant forbearance and that the pious should seek Allah's help through patient perseverance and prayer; it was also a part of South Asian female ethics to practise *sabar* in the face of marital strife (see Maqsood 2024: 62; Qureshi 2013; 2023).

Farah went on to explain that besides her in-laws being domineering, another significant issue in her marriage was her husband's mental health. He was coercive and physically abusive. He controlled her every movement, expecting a minute-by-minute account of everything she did. Over the years, the abuse escalated. Farah suffered with depression and was prescribed medication. Finally, as described in Chapter Four, Farah ran away to the police, who advised her not to return. After much coaxing from her in-laws, Farah did return to her marital home because she still wanted her marriage to succeed. When her in-laws were abroad, her husband tried to choke her. On that day, Farah feared for her life. She fled from the house and went to see the GP. She explained to me that, at this point, she decided that she could no longer practise the *sabar* needed to make her marriage work. She explained, *'Mai our sabar nahi kar sakti'* ('I could no longer practice forbearance'). The GP called the police, who took her into safekeeping. Despite the dilemma in which she found herself – between not wanting her marriage to break down, after 8 years of trying, and securing her safety and happiness – Farah explained that she decided not to return to her husband and prayed she was making the right decision.

Farah told me that she immediately called her parents at this point. Her family understood her situation and supported her. They knew that she possessed a *sabar* disposition and practised a lot of *sabar*. Farah never felt judged or forsaken by them. During this period, she suffered from body

aches and pains, sleeplessness, stress, tearfulness, loss of appetite, fear, and loneliness. She said she felt guilty for leaving her marriage and thought she had failed. Farah said her brother sent her a new phone and clothes and helped her with her immediate needs. Her father, although a very strict man, recognized that her marital breakdown was not her fault. He understood that Farah had practised *sabar* for 8 years while trying to make her marriage work. During this time, her husband had not changed. With tears in her eyes, she said that she was very broken and upset by her marital separation. Farah professed that during her daily prayers, she asked Allah why he had fated this outcome when it was not her fault. Farah distanced herself from her community and relatives. She feared her reputation being damaged and dreaded the gossip that would ensue if people learnt of her marital breakdown, which would also impact her younger sister's marriage prospects. Notwithstanding her doubts, Farah remained anchored in her faith throughout this challenging period, explaining that it was what kept her going.

The police introduced Farah to a legal aid lawyer who processed a non-molestation order against her husband and applied for Farah's DDV.[68] Farah said that she suffered from sleeplessness, stress, and fears about her future. At times, she found it challenging to maintain *sabar*. Farah said that although she continually trusted Allah and prayed for inner strength, she also doubted that she would be granted a DDV concession and feared the shame and stigma of deportation. She spoke to her family several times a day. During these calls, Farah cried and sought comfort and guidance. Farah's parents explained that her marital challenges were in her *naseeb* and that she should not feel guilty for leaving. Farah's mother said that Allah was checking Farah's faith to see if she could pass this challenging test. She said that Allah would reward her forbearance and bring better days. Even when I was helping Farah with her council flat application, she said, placing her faith in God, 'I think Allah will give me a flat, but I will have to do *sabar*, as you know, I have done a lot of *sabar*'.

In this chapter, I shall examine my interlocutors' capacity for patience and forbearance as they 'keep going' in the face of multiple moral dilemmas and carceral escapes across challenging life events. The concept of *sabar* refers to the virtue of forbearance, which is characterized by mental and emotional strength. It involves enduring difficulties with patience, maintaining self-control, and facing challenges without despair and complaint (see Mahmood 2012; Qureshi 2013; Maqsood 2024). It is a fundamental teaching in Islam, synonymous with being faithful and trusting in Allah's will. It provides individuals with the strength needed to face life's challenges. The Qur'an often emphasizes the importance of patience, such as in *Surah Al-Baqarah* (2: 153),[69] where it is stated that, 'Allah is truly with those who are patient'. By enduring hardships with patience, Muslims believe they will earn rewards in the afterlife. As stated in *Surah Az-Zumar* (39: 10),[70] the Qur'an also promises great rewards for the patient: 'Those who endure patiently will be given their reward without limit'. Thus, theologically, practising *sabar* is understood to bring one closer to Allah and help advance one's life in the hereafter.

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[68] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/application-for-benefits-for-visa-holder-domestic-violence
This concession gives migrant spouses temporary permission to stay in the United Kingdom and apply to claim benefits if their relationship breaks down because of domestic abuse.
[69] https://quran.com/en/al-baqarah/153
[70] https://quran.com/en/az-zumar/10 (Accessed 12 December 2024)

Notwithstanding the critiques levelled against *sabar* that it can be fatalistic (see Hamdy 2009), with people simply 'accepting' life's hardships, which can lead to inaction or be used as a justification to silence complaints (see Qureshi 2013), Al-Ghazali (2016) describes patience (*sabar*) as a fundamental human characteristic for achieving value-driven goals. For Al-Ghazali (2016), this begins with a commitment to personal values that are important to the individual. This is important as it allows them to remain steadfast in their goals when things are not going their way. Al-Ghazali (2016) argues that the key to an ethical life is those acts of patience that serve righteous goals. The question of which goals are righteous is one we must answer for ourselves. Al-Ghazali (2016) argues that although patience, a major virtue, constitutes half of faith, we are forbidden to be patient in the face of harm. Qureshi (2019: 185-6) nonetheless argues that *sabar* is a nuanced and multifaceted disposition – something that you are – prompting questions about how people practise *sabar*. This chapter aims to examine and unpack some of these complexities.

Considering Farah's situation, as described above, her description of her *sabar* illustrates that she had a patient disposition. She believed in its virtues and was committed to practising *sabar*, remaining anchored in her faith as she was (re)positioned across complex life events. Farah spoke to Allah daily. Although she experienced doubts and fears during her devotional practices, they did help her to 'keep going'. While at times she broke down, at others she possessed the steadfastness and inner strength needed to face her difficulties. In low moments, Farah questioned, lamentedly, why Allah had placed such challenges on her. At other times, when she was calm, she understood that she needed to submit to Allah's will and trust Him in her decisions while facing her hardships. Throughout her difficulties, Farah drew strength from her mother's advice that Allah would reward her *sabar*.

This orientation towards Allah indicates an active relationship with Him, signalling divine agency (Mittermaier 2011, 2012). Notwithstanding her tolerant disposition, Farah tied her capacity for *sabar* to her relationship with Allah through prayers and conversations. She also connected her capacity for *sabar* to worldly relationships and interactions, for example, connections with her husband and in-laws, who challenged her capacity for *sabar* to the point that she felt compelled to leave. Her capacity for *sabar* was promoted by her natal family's encouragement and support, however. Moreover, her mental health, fears and worries around her immigration status, and the stigma and shame resulting from her broken marriage – associated with different structures, such as the community and the legal structure – also influenced her feelings, thoughts, and imagination, and in turn, her capacity for *sabar* and her ethical self-becoming.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I entered the field with a view to collecting data organically by investigating the lives of women similar to those I had emotionally supported at a national refugee charity. Although my interlocutors were practising Muslims, my field observations mostly indicated that their primary concern was neither piety nor the conscious cultivation of ethical subjectivity. Instead, as outlined in previous chapters, they were focused on keeping going, with challenges, punitive structures, and power dynamics shaping their everyday actions. My interlocutors practised hopeful waiting in various different situations: when faced with long delays to their spousal visa applications and awaiting a 'good marriage' (Chapter Two); when submitting to forced marriages (Chapter Three); when obliged to 'keep going' through 'carceral escapes' (Chapter Four); when soliciting help from 'go-betweens' with UK bureaucratic and digitalized

settlement procedures (Chapter Five); and when facing impersonal bureaucratised Jobcentre coaching, underpinned by a carceral logic, to transition from welfare to work, until they finally settle into their lives as single women in the United Kingdom (Chapter Six). As such, the aim of this chapter is not to examine my interlocutors' piety or ethical self-cultivation through the study of religious practices (Mahmood 2001; 2005; 2012; Schulz 2008; Shannon 2004). It is also not a study of 'everyday Islam' geared at analysing inconsistencies, incoherences, or behaviours that might seem to fall outside of religious directives (Abenante 2014; Akhtar 2014; Al-deen 2020; Gökarıksel 2009; Jason 2016; Mittermaier 2012; Schielke 2009). Nor is it focused on modes of religiosity centring on divine interventions (Mittermaier 2012) or relationships (Williamson 2022). Instead, it analyses my interlocutors' articulation for *sabar* – a central tenet of Islam – in their ongoing process of ethical self-becoming as they 'keep going' through life's challenges and the multiple ethical dilemmas with which they are confronted. Therefore, although Islamic piety in the anthropological study of Islam takes 'discursive tradition' as its principal keyword, it is crucial not to lose sight of the complexity and singularity of people's subjectivities and life-worlds (Abenante & Cantini 2014: 4).

As explained in Chapter Two, marriage was viewed as a normative and primary life role, with gendered expectations of self-sacrifice and endurance making it difficult to leave, even in situations of distress. Migration often brought isolation and loneliness, as women were separated from familiar networks, faced language barriers, and feared stigma from relatives. When they explained these difficult times, they made regular references to *sabar*. Whether or not they possessed a forbearing disposition, when my interlocutors talked about their experiences both during their marriages and after they fled (a period spanning a few months to 8 years), *sabar* was a central idiom in explaining how they coped.

The existential characteristics of their marital situations differed from those of a disliked job, which one can quit, or an unfavourable friendship, which one can leave. The women were in marriages they did not want to or could not leave. Moreover, once they left, they were faced with punitive immigration rulings or disownment. Returning home was also difficult owing to the shame, stigma, and social precarity associated with divorce. I could relate to their predicaments because I, like them, had entered an arranged UK-South Asian transnational marriage at the age of 19. I knew that I needed to put in the hard work of compromise and adjustment to make my marriage work. For me, for economic, reputational, and family reasons, divorce was simply not a viable option. These women's situations resonated with me, as I too practised *sabar* during my marital challenges while facing my anxieties, worries, and fears – struggles that were hard to bear. However, unlike the women in my study, who remained steadfast in their faith, I went through a period of struggle during which I distanced myself from my beliefs.

Therefore, to understand their perspectives, I listened without any interruptions or judgement, maintaining an amenable, relaxed demeanour throughout. I wanted to offer my interlocutors a safe space in which they could speak openly. On one occasion, Bilquis said to me, '*Baji,* you listen with patience, and my heart feels like talking to you. You don't interrupt, argue, or clash with your ideas. You can understand my deepest thoughts more than my sister can. If I spoke to her like that, it (the conversations) would go into my '*khandaan*' (extended family), and people could taunt me. So, I keep myself safe and don't say things [to her], but with you, I can talk, and I know *Baji* will

listen'. In this penultimate chapter, I shall therefore focus on my interlocutors' subjective experience of *sabar* to understand its complex character and their experiences of ethical self-becoming.

There may be points of overlap between *umeed* (hope), discussed in Chapter Two, and *sabar* (forbearance). Delays in spousal visas were described in terms of 'hopeful waiting', a sense of anticipation for an unknown but desired future. This hope sometimes carried an unrealistic or 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), which they later recognized. In contrast, *sabar* reflected their capacity to withstand precarity alone and to navigate ethical dilemmas. After low moments, they reset by praying, giving thanks, and relying on Allah, while also drawing strength from supportive relationships. South Asian perspectives on marriage compel women to sustain their marriages, with *sabar* central to this effort, though always shaped by structural conditions and interpersonal dynamics. This chapter therefore examines how women's capacities for *sabar* emerge through the relational and situational contexts they navigate.

Sabar derives from the Arabic *s-b-r*, which also means patience or forbearance in Urdu and Punjabi (Qureshi 2013: 120), which all my interlocutors speak. Colloquially, it means patience, as in '*ek minit sabar kar*' (be patient for a minute) (Qureshi 2013: 120). It is a highly complex disposition, which raises questions about its locus and agency for those who exercise it (Qureshi 2019: 185). I cannot discuss the *sabar* practices of these women's husbands,[71] nor can I offer a minute-by-minute ethnographic explanation of *sabar* because I mostly heard narratives in which *sabar* was mentioned during difficult periods, across time and space. In these explanations, I came across various expressions that caught my attention, such as, '*Mai kitna sabar karti*' ('How much *sabar* could I do?'); '*Sabar karna bohot mushkil tha*' ('Doing *sabar* was tough'); '*Ab mai our sabar nahi kar sakti*' ('Now I can't do anymore *sabar*'); and '*Maine bohot sabar kiya*' ('I did a lot of *sabar*'). It is important to note that the women discussed their experiences retrospectively and that these are subjective interpretations on their part. However, although, with time, these interpretations may alter, or the focus may be placed on specific perceptions, these narratives still reflect a personal perspective on their experiences, shedding light on their journeys of self-becoming. Moreover, during my fieldwork, I noticed that for these women, *sabar,* prayers, submission, reliance, and steadfastness to Allah worked together in interconnecting ways. Interestingly, in their narratives, their capacity for *sabar* appeared to ebb and flow in the face of their challenges and relationships, with a tension at work between the moral frameworks to which they aspired and their lived experiences of ethical actions.

Studies suggest that, with regular practice, *sabar* instils fortitude (Mahmood 2012: 174). It also exhibits forms of self-sublimation and self-assertion (Qureshi 2013; 2023). Scholarly works acknowledge the importance of the passing of time for the enactment and effects of *sabar* (Maqsood 2023; Qureshi 2023). In contrast, my findings underscore *sabar's* relational constitution. In my interlocutors' cases, it was not fatalistic but rather premised on the tenets of their faith. However, it is important not to decentre the hardship people face in fulfilling the principles of their faith as they wish. Although there is no single approach to capturing complex human

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[71] See Bi (2019: 274-8), who writes about migrant husbands' practices of *sabar* in the face of precarity, vulnerability, and domestic abuse. In my case studies, the husbands were UK citizens, and the women were migrant brides.

experiences (Hollan 2001: 62), I have chosen to adopt the 'ethical (re)positioning' framework here – a cartographic approach designed to examine the interweaving forces that shape processes of self-becoming over time and space. I use this lens to question how the women studied here navigate the interweaving dynamics of familial, legal, social, and medical structures, interpersonal relationships, thoughts, and emotions, as well as to understand how my interlocutors navigated carceral escapes and multiple moral dilemmas.

I discovered that, irrespective of whether they had a forbearing disposition, my interlocutors worked hard in their *sabar* practices. In their experiences, and while seeking to make the right choices to reach their goals, they frequently suffered. At critical moments, they were faced with difficult decisions as to whether to change direction or continue on their current path. They made these decisions while placing complete trust in and reliance on Allah's wisdom and balancing personal effort with the acknowledgement that the outcome would be what He ordains. On the one hand, they sought solace in this belief while, on the other, they had to balance their desires and expectations with what finally transpired as a result of Allah's will. During this time, the process of self-becoming through *sabar* involved a prolonged experience of hardship, the outcomes of which did not always align with the women's wishes. Remaining calm and composed during such times proved challenging, and the anguish that ensued manifested itself through crying, anxiety, depression, stress, body aches, poor health, and sleeplessness.

I would therefore argue that, on the route to self-becoming, *sabar* is a complex, fluctuating personal practice. It is grounded in people's theories of change, self-formation, and relations between the self and other, and mediated by institutions, structures, and imaginaries. It reflects individuals' 'ethical imagination' (Moore 2011), their relationships with Imams or the Prophet's family (Williamson 2022), and a powerful omnipotent God – Allah. Following Deeb (2015), I would argue that religious discipline and normativity shape the everyday and that everyday social life transforms religious discipline and normativity. Consequently, I believe that these areas of life are not separate (Deeb 2015: 95-6). Instead, faith is interpreted and performed on a subjective basis. I argue that the capacity for *sabar* unfolds within the challenges of life and devotion.

In the following sections, I shall first set out the anthropological discourse on *sabar*, before proceeding to examine how my interlocutors' 'ethical imagination' (Moore 2011) mediates their capacity for *sabar*. As they navigated experiences of marriage migration, domestic abuse, deportation threats, and difficult relationships, my interlocutors all expressed their capacities for *sabar*. To demonstrate the relational constitution of *sabar*, I have used Shazia's case study to illustrate the influence that poor interpersonal relationships with her family have on her capacities. Next, turning to Irum, I shall demonstrate the effects that poor mental health, deportation fears, and economic precarity have on her capacity for *sabar*. Finally, drawing upon the experiences of Lubna, Bilquis, Fatima, Saira, and Razia, I shall explore how caring relationships affected their capacity for *sabar*, before ending with some concluding remarks.

To situate my work, in the next section I shall examine some studies on *sabar* that contribute to debates on the ethical self.

Scholarship on *Sabar*

In Mahmood's (2012: 174) research, her interlocutor, Nadia, explains that she cultivated *sabar* because it is an essential attribute of a pious character. She explains that *sabar* requires that the faithful not complain in the face of hardships. Nadia proceeds to explain that it is through regular practice that *sabar* pervades the individual's life, establishing them as a *sabira* – one who exercises *sabar* (Mahmood 2012: 174). The goal in practising *sabar* should not be a desire for help with reaching one's goals or to reduce suffering. Espousing this explanation, Mahmood (2012: 173) argues that ethical self-cultivation is a notion of human agency understood as individual responsibility. It is a site of considerable investment, struggle, and achievement, bounded by an eschatological and social structure. She argues that 'it privileges neither the relational nor the autonomous self… but a conception of individual ethics whereby each person is responsible for her action'. Here, Mahmood (2012: 174) argues that each person is responsible for maintaining their ethical practices, which privileges the self's ability to act.

Nadia (Mahmood 2012: 169-70) undoubtedly offers a rational explanation of what *sabar* is, detailing its practice. Interestingly, though, she also highlights the social context in which Egyptian women practise *sabar*, underscoring the injustices they face in marriage and highlighting the way in which unmarried women are treated as though they have a defect, being subjected to repeated harassment and questions about why they are not married. In this context, women even stop socializing to avoid social embarrassment. Nadia explains that women cannot propose marriage; they must wait for a man to ask for their hand in marriage. What is even worse, she explains, is that women's immediate family treat them like they have a disease, coming to think that their daughters/sisters must have some failings since no man has approached them for their hand in marriage. Nadia is clear about these injustices, explaining that this situation is 'very hard and a killer' for women (Mahmood 2012: 170). She also argues that women must have an assertive personality to stop this from affecting them. Eventually, to explain why they are not married, women begin to think something must be deeply wrong with them.

I would suggest that, in Mahmood's (2012) account of women's ethical self-cultivation, the significant hardships the women in her study face as a result of family, community, and structural understandings of marriage remain unaddressed. In contrast to Mahmood's (2012) emphasis on pious practices as an individual endeavour, I suggest that these women's practices of *sabar* are relational, influenced by how notions of marriage are constructed, and their perceptions of themselves and their marital status are affected by others. Within this context, however, Mahmood (2012) argues that women still successfully practise *sabar*. While acknowledging that they help each other to overcome the challenges of their ethical practices, she argues that it is through regular individual outward practices that they achieve stable ethical self-cultivation. Mahmood (2012) reaches these conclusions by following an Aristotelian-inspired tradition that conceives of ethics not as an idea (a more Kantian proposition) but rather as a set of practical activities germane to a particular way of life, upon which Foucault also draws (Mahmood 2012: 27). In contrast, my interlocutors' cases reveal subjective complexities in their capacity for *sabar*, highlighting processes of moral and ethical becoming outside the Foucauldian 'primal scene of the artisan's workshop'

(Mattingly 2014: 88-9), unlike the women in Mahmood's (2012) research, who cultivate a pious self through formal training.

Shedding light on the everyday practices of *sabar*, Qureshi (2013) studied middle-aged Pakistani women in the United Kingdom with chronic illnesses. She shows how, over several years of shouldering the labours of kinship, such as caring, cooking, and cleaning duties, *sabar* has resulted in bodily suffering. These women's status as *sabar walis* (women who practise *sabar*) affords them a high moral standing among other women in their kin and community (Qureshi 2013: 128). In old age, their years of *sabar* become a means to renegotiate support from their husband and children (Qureshi 2013: 132). Qureshi (2013) argues that *sabar* practices involve an interplay between self-sublimation and self-assertion, demonstrating how women make choices in the face of virtuous practices deemed compulsory and correct and how they face contextual challenges, interpersonal dynamics, shifting ideas of ethical self-formations, bodily illness, and moral status, among other things. Similarly, Maqsood (2024) studies middle-class women in Lahore, Pakistan, who want their husbands to change and share their more disciplined religious aspirations achieved through religious study. She demonstrates the interaction between time and the practice of *sabar* by pointing to the role that waiting plays in South Asian women's practices of *sabar*, as it is over time that these women achieve their marital aspirations. Maqsood (2024) explains that, in her cases, *sabar* depends on the individual's malleability and openness to the passing of time to achieve change in their husbands and, in turn, be open to self-transformation.

These ethnographic studies of *sabar* attest to the disconnect and contradiction between earnest words of religious virtuosos, women's perceptions of their practices of *sabar*, their bodily illnesses, the passing of time, and the act of waiting; that is, the tensions underpinning the practice of *sabar* in everyday life. It also reveals the interrelatedness with others (family and community). For example, *sabar* is connected with these women's moral self-perceptions and sense of who they are (*sabar walis*, in Qureshi's (2013) cases, or women with disease, in Mahmood's (2012) study), highlighting the personal and interpersonal struggles inherent in *sabar* practices. It is also important to note that these examples occur in physical spaces where interpersonal relationships take place (the home, community centres, and gathering spaces).

Studies have tended to argue for 'this-worldly-oriented forms of religiosity' (Mittermaier 2012: 249) by illustrating the steadiness and success of *sabar* through rigorous practice. Research has also underscored the ambiguities and complexity of *sabar* by illustrating how it manifests itself through self-sublimation and self-assertion, the role of time, and its association with chronic illness (Maqsood 2024; Qureshi 2013). Through an examination of vertical relationships with Imams or the Prophet's family (Williamson 2022) or dream narratives (Mittermaier 2012), other studies have focused on more metaphysical aspects. In contrast, this study indicates that, as a pious practice, *sabar* is a relationally constituted capacity that exists on a continuum, illustrating that a person's ability to follow a moral rule depends on many factors. Women are pressured by their community, family, and moral frameworks and are expected to behave according to these rules. Moreover, shame, stigma, fear of retribution in the afterlife, and personal views and disposition are also a means to ensure compliance with rules. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that the lived experiences of adhering to moral dictums are complicated and relationally constituted.

While unreflective, negative moral judgement can only intensify an already difficult situation, an in-depth description of the challenges involved in ethical actions will foster a more considered analysis at the individual, family, and community level. Consequently, this chapter calls for a critical reflection on the practices of *sabar*, shifting the focus onto how everyday lived experiences are shaped by the influences of religious practices, which are simultaneously shaped and transformed by social life and relationships, thereby highlighting the co-constituted nature of *sabar* in the ongoing, ever-evolving processes of ethical self-becoming.

I shall now turn to some case studies to illustrate my argument.

Sabar: A Co-constituted Capacity

I shall begin with Shazia's case, to illustrate the effects of her challenging physical (domestic abuse) and emotional (loneliness and despair) situation on her sense of self, how this compromised her capacity for *sabar*, and the effect on her journey of self-becoming.

Sabar during domestic abuse and loneliness: Shazia

Shazia often spoke about her abusive experiences in her in-laws' house. She explained that she had come to the United Kingdom on a spousal visa but did not understand her legal status. During the 5 years and 3 months that she stayed in her marriage (from her teenage years to early twenties), her natal family never accepted her pleas for help, nor did they believe her when she described the abuse she was experiencing in her marital home. As I listened, I recalled a conversation in which Shazia explained that when she migrated, her mother told her that just as she herself had had to endure her marriage, so too must she now endure hers. Shazia proceeded to explain that her parents blamed her for all her marital problems and told her husband he was not at fault. I wondered if this was because Shazia's husband was supporting her family economically or because they did not want the shame of her divorce, or perhaps both.

Shazia felt abandoned. She explained that, at first, in her prayers, she wept to Allah, asking Him to give her the capacity to face her life's challenges. She said that, although she did a lot of *sabar*, over the years the abuse she experienced from those she deemed family never stopped. Shazia explained that their harsh treatment and her sense of abandonment became intolerable. Although she continued praying and fasting during Ramadan, she experienced a sense of despair. At that point, she explained that she became convinced that no one cared for or loved her. She said she felt entirely neglected by her family, her husband (also her first cousin), and her mother-in-law (her paternal aunt), saying that, one day she felt so alone and desperate that she took four to five sleeping tablets belonging to her uncle-in-law, seeking some relief from her despair. Her mother-in-law found her and shook her until she woke up. She explained that her family's harsh attitudes towards her did not change; she continued to be neglected and alone, and her capacity for *sabar* significantly diminished.

'Loneliness' is a complex concept to research from a cross-cultural, anthropological perspective (Allerton 2007: 22). A 'spinster', for instance, can be an icon of loneliness. Loneliness can be

associated with unmarried women, orphans, or those with no siblings (Allerton 2007), and it can also be connected with dying alone (see Allison 2017 on lonely or solitary death). Shazia was married and surrounded by kin, and had siblings, yet she felt alone because, as she explained, there was no connection or care between her and her kin members. I believe that her case differs from Farah's, which I described above. Although in a different country, Farah received care and understanding from her parents and siblings, and did not feel lonely. While facing marital and immigration-related challenges, their continued support helped her to uphold her capacity for s*abar.*

Shazia explained that her despair did not abate. She again took four or five sleeping tablets and was discovered by her husband. In an attempt to describe the moment when she took the tablets, she said, 'I cannot think of anything but taking the pills, I cannot remember Allah, I can see nothing but the tablets (to get relief from her despair)'. As the pressures and difficulties, she was facing increased, she resorted to desperate measures, taking pharmaceuticals to block out her situation, sleep, and not have to think, similarly to Burraway's (2018) interlocutors, who turn to drugs to block out their life's difficulties. Shazia explained that the abuse in her marital home continued.

At that point, with no experience of love or care, Shazia said that she also came to believe that Allah did not love her: 'I did all I could to please people. I did not do bad to people, so why did Allah do this to me? At that time, I thought that Allah also did not love me'. Self-constitution is a dialectical process in which individuals experience themselves as their self both directly and indirectly from the standpoint of others (Crapanzano 1981: 140). Although I did not probe Shazia, she may have been projecting this feeling onto her relationship with Allah. For example, Ewing (1990: 259-61) illustrates how her interlocutor, Shamim, built a representation of herself as a good wife based on religious imagery that centres on obedience and submission. She also had a model of herself as disobedient because she wanted to enter a love marriage against her family's wishes and did not want to sacrifice her feelings to obey her parents. Seeing herself through her parents' eyes, this disobedience left her feeling guilty. This perspective shift illustrates the connection between self-representations and representations by others.

Throughout this time, Shazia carried on faithfully. After years of practising *sabar,* when her husband handed her to the police on false charges of theft, Shazia decided not to return. She solicited help from a neighbour who was aware of her situation. The following day, with the neighbour's encouragement and support, Shazia left her marriage. Although Shazia was situated in a powerful hierarchical discourse that discourages marital breakdown, and was aware of the significant social sanctions such an act would entail, she nonetheless decided to dissent (Moore 2007: 35-6) in the face of this ethical dilemma and not return to her marital home. With her neighbour's support, she went to the police and reported her case, after which she was placed in a women's refuge.

I shall now turn to Irum's case study to illustrate how distant institutions, structures, and imaginaries also influence the individual's ethical imagination.

Sabar in the face of deportation threats and economic fears: Irum

As explained in Chapter Four, despite not wanting her marriage to break down, Irum fled from her marital home after receiving death threats from her father-in-law. When she left, she contacted her family, expecting their support. Instead, her family told her never to contact them again unless she returned to her husband's home. Irum had nowhere to go. The police placed her in a women's refuge, where she lived for 11 months until the UK Home Office decided on her immigration status. In the refuge, Irum received counselling, made new friends, and learnt English. Her medical reports stated that she was suffering from depression and anxiety. Irum explained that she felt extremely alone because her parents and family had abandoned her. She was petrified by the uncertainty around her immigration status and was extremely fearful of having to return to Pakistan, where she was not wanted. This was compounded by her inability to comprehend the UK's legal bureaucracies. Faced with an uncertain immigration status and no money or family connections, she felt stressed as she contemplated her future. During that time, although she prayed every day and derived some happiness from her prayers, Irum explained that, at very low moments, '*Sabar kara bohot mushkil tha*' ('I found it very difficult to practise *sabar*), and she self-harmed in the face of her fears and loneliness. She did not elaborate on her behaviours, and I did not feel it would be right to interrogate her. Although she persevered through life's adversities and took the step to flee her marital strife, Irum saw no option but to wait for the UK Home Office's ruling on her application for ILR in the United Kingdom.

In Irum's case, I suggest that while she was waiting for the UK Home Office's ruling, she was in a state of limbo, filled with insecurity and fear of losing her case and facing deportation. This illustrates the uncertainty and unpredictability caused by the spatial lines of exclusion or inclusion as a result of the UK's punitive immigration laws, demonstrating how institutional dynamics (both familial and legal) can affect the individual's 'ethical imagination' (Moore 2007). Although Irum derived some solace from her prayers and faith, her feelings of despair diminished her capacity for *sabar* as she imagined her future precarity. This led her to engage in acts that she perceived as undesirable, but which nonetheless offered her some relief from her psychological stresses, helping her to regulate and control her emotions (see Ogden & Bennett 2014: 4, whose participants report a similar sense of relief). I would argue, therefore, that institutional dynamics can inflict psychological pain upon people. Such enforced experiences of waiting can become central to feelings of hope, doubt, and uncertainty (Bandak & Janeja 2018: 1) in the individual's process of ethical self-becoming.

The frustrating effects of institutions and structures can be ongoing and have an adverse effect on individuals. For example, during my time in the field, both Shazia and Irum, who had no family to whom they could turn, continued to turn to pharmaceuticals and self-harm while under the extreme stress imposed on them either by structures (such as asylum, benefits, and housing rules) or by their interpersonal relationships (such as their toxic relationship with community members or housemates and their divorce communication with in-laws or romantic partners). They both said that they felt terrible about their actions and immediately called for emergency support. Their actions may have been a plea for help (also see Ogden & Bennett 2014: 5). In both cases, when their circumstances improved, they stopped these behaviours (see Ogden & Bennett 2014: 6,

whose participants also describe self-harming behaviours subsiding when their personal circumstances changed). These accounts illustrate the relational character of the capacity for *sabar*.

I shall now turn to some case studies that illustrate the role of supportive relations in relation to *sabar* capacities across carceral life events.

Sabar during carcerality and caring relationships: Lubna, Fatima, Saira, and Razia

Although Lubna's family ostracized her after she ran away from her marital home, she did have the support of a few close friends. She lived in an HMO provided by the UK Home Office and sought counselling from a local refugee centre. Her immigration case was rejected twice, which, she explained, filled her with immense fear. Lubna faced an ethical dilemma – either to return home where she was unwanted or to stay in the United Kingdom illegally. Lubna decided to remain in the United Kingdom illegally. Lubna explained that although she could not sleep at night and was very depressed, she still practised *sabar*. During my fieldwork, I observed her in that situation. She explained that, during those times: 'I often felt I was at rock bottom. I was nearly there (to take an overdose). Lubna went on to explain, 'When you trust your family, who, for me, are the most trustworthy people, when they leave you, and you go through so much, there is nothing you can do. I think Allah was there with me even in the darkest periods. I believe that'. She explained that the main thing she did, which her late grandmother had taught her as a child, was to be grateful and remember her blessings. Lubna explained that her grandmother's words had remained with her, and she acted on them by endeavouring to remain thankful for the people she had in the United Kingdom. It was not easy, however. She struggled to remember her blessings and said, 'I would feel exhausted and cry, but then I would start reminding myself how my situation could be worse'.

During this period, she registered with a local NGO that supports illegal migrants. They placed her in various people's homes for short periods of up to 6 months. During this time, Lubna explained that she felt like she was in a dark tunnel, unable to see the light, but she knew that there was light ahead. She said, 'I never lost that light – that is what faith is'. Some years later, the NGO placed Lubna with a family with whom she became close. They welcomed her into their home indefinitely. Every time I visited, I observed their warmth and generosity. Lubna and their daughter, who was Lubna's age, became very close friends. She offered Lubna a lot of support. Finally, Lubna met a man, but unfortunately, he felt unable to commit to marriage because of the pressure his mother exerted on him to marry his cousin. Lubna was faced with an ethical dilemma: staying with him would mean living with uncertainty, but leaving him would take away the option of applying for legal rights based on marriage. Lubna chose to leave. However, 1 year later, the man returned and proposed to Lubna. Finally, 7 years after arriving in this country, Lubna married a UK citizen and gained legal residence. For Lubna, the experiences of living in the company of others and a good marriage offered her a chance for ethical self-becoming (Donnelly 2022). Her relationship with Allah was also integral to this process, helping her to forbear her life's challenges.

Like Lubna, Bilquis, who was a stepchild, was also disowned by her natal kin after her mother and father passed away. In her marital home, she experienced domestic abuse. She miscarried her unborn child after being physically abused, but when her husband apologized and promised that

things would change, Bilquis faced an ethical dilemma: while returning to her marital home could mean more abuse, if she left, she would have nowhere to go. Bilquis chose to return. The abuse did not stop, and soon after, her husband handed her to the police on false charges of abusing him. Immediately afterwards, Bilquis applied for refugee status, explaining that, during this challenging time, she cried a lot owing to her painful past experiences. She said that without the love of her family, she knew she was alone. During that period, Bilquis found support from other people. For example, she received emotional support from a therapist at the local refugee centre with whom she is still in contact today. She met and built a supportive relationship with one family through her GP whom she would visit regularly, especially at desperate times, such as when she lost her first application to gain asylum in the United Kingdom and felt 'like jumping out of the window'. Often, she would visit the family for 7-10 days at a time.

Throughout these ups and downs, Bilquis maintained a close relationship with Allah. During her asylum process, she said, 'I felt there was only me and my Allah; I know it was up to Allah to give or not to give (refugee status in the United Kingdom); there is only Him'. She explained that, throughout her long 2-year wait, she remained engrossed in her prayers. She followed a routine with her prayers and felt protected by Allah. He helped her to practise *sabar*, without which she thinks that she may have chosen to end her life. After that, when Bilquis made a second asylum application, on the day of her court hearing, she explained that she continually prayed the *tasbih* (repeated prayer on prayer beads) '*Astaghfirullah*' (I seek forgiveness in God). Bilquis said that she was convinced that her problems would disappear thanks to this prayer. After she won her case, Bilquis said, 'I cried because I had lost so much, and now, I had won'. Then, she looked up at the sky and said, 'I had prayed to Allah, asking him to keep the judge's heart soft', after which she looked at me and said, 'You say this prayer and see how your life changes'.

However, one day, while Bilquis and I were chatting on her bed in her tiny bedsit, she said sadly, '*Baji,* I still have strength, and I keep *sabar*'. She said that although she suffered from poor sleep, body aches and pains, and low mood, she still managed to go out and about. She was getting on with her life all on her own. She said that sometimes she practised *sabar,* but at other times she could not. However, she was carrying on. She explained that, in her depressive state, she found it hard to go to work and sometimes wanted to spend all day sleeping. Despite this, she would get up, put her clothes and lipstick on, smile, and face the world. She looked at me sadly at this point and said, 'But what is going on inside me only you and I know. The world does not know this'. Bilquis whispered, 'I tell you things which I can't tell anyone else. *Baji,* I can never live a normal life mentally. I am not in the right place'. She said that people cannot understand '*kya beeti hai mere upper*' ('what I have gone through'). Bilquis said, 'What is inside, only Allah knows', and 'My mind gets disturbed with all the pain I have experienced'.

Bilquis told me that when people say, 'Learn to do *sabar*', they do so because they have full bellies, large families, a home, and money, and cannot comprehend pain, having never experienced what she has. She explained that '*Baji,* my biggest pain is my broken home, my lost child and my lonely life'. As I sat on the bed listening, I realized that no one could truly see inside the heads and hearts of women like Bilquis, nor fully understand what they were going through. After she had poured out her feelings, she said, 'I can do *sabar* about the pain he (her ex-husband) inflicted on me

because I think God will take account of his actions. God will make him pay. I don't envy people who have homes. But with much sadness, I remember my home, which I lost'.

Bilquis expressed that she was suffering and feeling low, and said, '*Meri himmat nikal jati ha*' ('My strength leaves me'). She explained that, along with poor sleep, her mind was disturbed and constantly whirling. When this happened, she would pray to regain her composure. Bilquis said, 'I have strong *'imaan'* (faith) when I speak to Allah; I tell him my innermost thoughts, bringing me closer to Him. Yet, although at times I am firm in my faith, at other times, I am flailing. It is hard to do *sabar*, but it's not my fault. It's a struggle because I am all alone'. I understood that Bilquis' situation stemmed from the multiple laminations of her unabatingly harsh life experiences. That day, her situation brought tears to my eyes. We hugged each other and cried.

Around that time, Bilquis entered a relationship with a man who worked in the neighbourhood. He wanted a relationship but not marriage. She was so alone that she, too, wanted the relationship. On the other hand, she explained that she had a deep connection with Allah, which prevented her from being in a relationship outside marriage. Bilquis explained that she could not sleep with the man because she knew it was a sin, and so she decided to leave him and return to God. Bilquis said, '*Baji,* Allah is testing me by sending this man into my life. Although I fall on my knees in supplication to my '*Rab*' (Lord), I can't bear the pain of leaving him (her partner). I had a strong relationship with this man. I still feel connected with him. I can't move him out of my mind. I try to forget and do *sabar* by praying to Allah, but it is hard. I am a human being, not a '*farishta*' (angel)'. She went on to explain that, 'I have a lot of trust in Allah. I know if I leave the man for Allah, He will look after me and reward me in a better way'.

However, Bilquis explained that, 'The challenge is very great, and then I crumble and fall very badly from inside. The pain gnaws inside me, erodes me, but I hold on to Allah and do *sabar* – only then I can defeat these thoughts'. Giving me a long, painful look, Bilquis explained, '*Sabar* is very hard'. She elaborated that people say '*Sabar karo*' ('Have forbearance'). But Bilquis said, '*Sabar ko samajna our sabar karne mai bohot farak ha*' ('Understanding forbearance and doing forbearance are two very different things'). In a low voice Bilquis continued, '*Sabar karna bohot mushkil ha*' ('Doing/practicing forbearance is very difficult'). Bilquis's feelings resonated with those expressed by other interlocutors throughout my fieldwork, giving me a better understanding of her experiences. Stressful situations can challenge a person's capacity for *sabar*. Bilquis' case shows that practising faith is a means to persevere and 'keep going'. But it is more complex than a simple exchange in which devotion guarantees peace in return. Fully trusting in Allah requires a leap of faith, which my interlocutors willingly took and through which they acted and made decisions. Despite their daily religious practices, moments of extreme hardship – both external and internal – often led them to experience psychological distress, which at times became unbearable. Such moments were nonetheless interspersed with periods of calm.

Similarly, Fatima, Saira, and Razia were all victims of domestic abuse, faced deportation threats, and had to undergo a waiting period before being granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom. Throughout this time, they all practised *sabar*. For example, while Fatima was staying in Home Office-provided accommodation, she suffered with poor relationships with her housemates. Fatima also suffered with boredom as a result of being unable to enter paid

employment. She found volunteering roles to fill 2 days of the week. During this period, Fatima experienced immense stress after losing her asylum case. Finally, 2 years later, she was granted the legal right to remain in the United Kingdom. Saira, for her part, suffered with severe mental health challenges triggered by fighting a complicated divorce process and loneliness after moving out of her women's refuge and into a single-occupancy flat. Razia also suffered with anxiety when she faced homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The women often spoke about how they cried, felt extremely worried and very low and depressed, and how their capacity for *sabar* was often diminished. Throughout these times, they explained that their natal families, with whom they had a very close relationship and spoke daily, gave them strength, consoled them, and helped them regain focus, allowing them to practise *sabar*.

Although their families were not in the United Kingdom, they were still able to receive support, advice, and care through regular conversations with them. Moreover, they also built other relationships. For example, Fatima connected with a distant cousin in the United Kingdom, who provided her with guidance and support when she left her marital home. After leaving her husband, Razia developed a close friendship with Farah. Although these women faced numerous difficulties, their experiences show that the relationships they maintained with others – whether individually, collectively, or in general – were crucial to their ethical selves (Donnelly 2022). Alongside their faith in Allah, the presence of others (whether near or distant) played a significant role in shaping and reinforcing their ethical self-becoming (Donnelly 2022). Furthermore, their interactions with others, including Allah, enabled them to self-reflect and cultivate an 'ethical imagination' (Moore 2007: 25), through which their ongoing ethical self-becoming unfolded.

These case studies suggest that *sabar* is a complex personal practice in which capacities fluctuate, existing on a continuum. For example, Shazia's poor relationship with her natal family and her in-laws led to feelings of loneliness and despair. To cope, she turned to pharmaceuticals for relief. In the absence of care from those around her, Shazia also came to feel that Allah did not love her. Her case illuminates that *sabar* capacities are grounded in people's self-formation and relationships between the self and other. Her *sabar* is not fatalistic, however, because Shazia (like Farah and Irum) decided to leave her marital home despite the views of marriage according to which she had been socialized, knowing that her family would ostracize her as a result.

Irum's case highlights how *sabar* capacities are mediated by punitive structural, institutional forces and a person's conception of their precarious future. Although her daily prayers provide her with some comfort, her capacity for *sabar* is diminished by the despair that thoughts about her future precarity cause her while she waits to find out the UK Home Office's decision about her immigration status. This leads her to engage in acts of self-harm; despite seeing these actions as undesirable, they nonetheless offer some relief from the psychological stresses she is suffering. Irum's case demonstrates how institutional dynamics can inflict psychological pain upon people, affecting their capacity for *sabar*, and how this experience of waiting can become central to feelings of hope, doubt, and uncertainty (Bandak & Janeja 2018: 1) in the individual's process of ethical self-becoming through the practice of *sabar*.

Contrastingly, the cases of Lubna, Bilquis, Fatima Saira, and Razia highlight their steadfastness to their faith, accompanied by positive social relationships that support their capacities for *sabar*. Even

though Lubna's and Bilquis's natal families disown them, and they suffer a great deal of psychological pain, they also manage to build positive relationships in the United Kingdom that help them forbear their challenges. In Farah's, Saira's, Razia's, and Fatima's cases, along with other relationships they build in the United Kingdom, they continue to receive support, advice, and care from their natal families through regular conversations, despite them still living back in their home countries.

My interlocutors' experiences can be seen as a product of 'social relationships and interactions' (Long & Moore 2013: 2). This creates a sociality centring on a 'dynamic and interactive relational matrix' (Long & Moore 2013: 2) through which the women understand the world they face, survive challenges, and undergo a process of ethical becoming. Long & Moore (2013) argue that these relationships are interdependent, co-produced, and co-constitutional. Consequently, rather than seeking to understand whether *sabar* can be fatalistic, where people simply 'accept' life's hardships in silence or through inaction, I have applied the concept of 'ethical (re)positioning' to highlight the challenging environments my interlocutors navigated, which also shaped their movements as they 'ke[pt] going' (Vigh 2009). The women in my study all had a strong relationship with Allah. They also had interpersonal relationships and interactions with various different structures (law, family, UK bureaucracy) and social and economic systems. Their capacity for *sabar* was grounded in and constituted by these relationships.

My findings indicate that *sabar* is a complex, fluctuating personal practice mediated by structures and imaginaries. It is grounded in people's theories of change, self-formation, and relationships between the self and other, reflecting their 'ethical imagination' (Moore 2011) and relationships with a powerful, omnipotent God – Allah. It shows the inseparability and interconnecting influence of devotional and material practices, where faith is subjectively interpreted and performed. These women's cases also demonstrate that the individual's capacity for *sabar* unfolds within the challenges of life and devotion. Remaining steadfast in their faith, my interlocutors' faith grows more coherent within the messy incoherence of their lived experiences.

Conclusion

By examining my interlocutors' articulation and practice of forbearance (*sabar*), this chapter has explored how engaging with a central tenet of faith – independent of formal religious studies or the participation in religious groups – shaped their ongoing ethical self-becoming. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed these women practise a faith formed by their socialization experiences. As they navigated challenging events, carceral escapes, and multiple moral dilemmas, this formed part of their daily lives. In line with the core tenets of their belief, they professed faith in one God, prayed daily, fasted during Ramadan, and aspired to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca. They trusted and relied entirely on Allah (*tawakkul*) and practised forbearance (*sabar*), balancing personal effort with faith in Allah's divine wisdom, guidance, and support.

Scholarly studies suggest that, through consistent learning and practice, *sabar* becomes a steady practice that is infused into the individual's life (Mahmood 2012: 174). Other studies suggest that *sabar* is expressed through the acts of self-sublimation and self-assertion (Qureshi 2013; 2023),

underscoring the significance of time in its enactment (Maqsood 2024; Qureshi 2023). In contrast, I have applied the 'ethical (re)positioning' framework to understand the lived contradictions inherent in this practice and to examine how my interlocutors navigated their challenging life transitions. This analysis indicates that *sabar is fundamentally* relational and is inherently connected to and interlinked with faith practices such as prayers, fasting, keeping *mannats,* saying *tasbih*, and reading the Quran. As Farah explained, praying gives her a sense of peace. Faith provides an anchor through good times and challenging ones. These women trust in Allah's will and make decisions accordingly. This is not a fatalistic view, however; the women acknowledge that piety fosters spiritual growth, moral behaviour, inner peace, resilience, and rewards in the afterlife. However, extreme hardship often leads to emotional suffering, which, despite becoming intolerable at times, is punctuated with moments of calm.

In the cases of Farah, Bilquis, Razia, Saira, Fatima, and Lubna, we have observed that their capacity for *sabar* varies throughout their hardships. They report that good relationships with family, friends, and professionals help them harness their capacity for *sabar*. In Shazia's case, we saw how the behaviour of other people affects her sense of self, which she then projects onto others – such as her understanding of Allah's love for her. This causes her spiritual pain. Similarly, Bilquis feels spiritually pained after losing her unborn child as well as after leaving her romantic partner, who makes demands that her faith does not allow. Although punitive institutions and structures cause these women psychological stress, in Irum's and Shazia's cases, when combined with adverse family relationships, this also has a negative effect on their capacity for *sabar*.

So far, studies have concentrated on ethical self-cultivation and on inconsistencies, incoherences, or behaviours that seem to fall outside of religious directives, as well as on people's modes of religiosity (Abenante 2014; Akhtar 2014; Al-deen 2020; Gökarıksel 2009; Janson 2016; Mahmood 2001; 2005; 2012; Mittermaier 2012; Shannon 2004; Schielke 2007; 2009; Schulz 2008). In contrast, I have explored my interlocutors' articulation and practice of *sabar*, a central tenet of Islam, as part of life's challenges through which ethical self-becoming progresses. I have argued that *sabar* is a complex, fluctuating personal practice. It is grounded in people's theories of change, self-formation, and self-other relations and mediated by institutions, structures, and imaginaries. It reflects individuals' 'ethical imagination' (Moore 2011), including relationships with the divine – Allah. In the cases studied here, the women's faith remained steadfast, emerging through the challenges and ambiguities they face, and reflecting a dynamic piety that takes shape precisely through these challenges.

Through this longitudinal study, I have therefore sought to demonstrate that religious discipline and normativity both shape the everyday and are produced and translated through everyday social life (Deeb 2015). Consequently, I would argue that these areas of life are not as separate as they might appear (Deeb 2015: 95-6); instead, I contend that faith is subjectively interpreted and performed and emerges out of the interaction of life's challenges and acts of devotion. It follows that even if people aspire to abide by moral tenets, such adherence in everyday life is far more complex.

As a life coach with counselling training, I recognize the importance of ethnographic accounts of people's practices of faith. It is my hope that this in-depth ethnographic account will offer valuable

insights into practical theology, which aims to analyse and understand lived practices (Osmer 2008) and allows social sciences to be used as a source of information because both disciplines prioritize lived human experience (Isgandarova 2018). On a more practical level, I hope that it will inform secular Western therapeutic practices, which see individuals as self-directing and autonomous, as well as the emerging profession of Islamic social work, such as Islamic psychology and Islamic psychotherapy (Isgandarova 2022: 165-6), and its practice with faith-based clients.

Ultimately, by studying my interlocutors' (re)positioning across repeated challenges, this chapter calls for a deeper understanding of individuals' varying capacities for forbearance and their ability to act according to prescribed moral expectations. It also acknowledges that such variances are integral to the faith journey, which is neither linear nor fixed but shaped by temporal shifts in circumstance, aspiration, and complex lived experience. Faith practices are shown to be dynamic, subjectively interpreted, enacted, and continually re-evaluated over time, emerging through the interplay of life's ebbs and flows and acts of devotion. They are informed by struggles, joys, memory, longing, and imagined futures. It follows that while individuals may seek to uphold moral principles, their ability to do so in everyday life is mediated by both personal and structural conditions, making such adherence deeply complex and temporally contingent.

This marks the conclusion of my substantive chapters and the exploration of my interlocutors' multifaceted (re)positions as they navigate consecutive challenging life events. Their journeys of self-becoming are ongoing, marked by the building blocks of hope, abidance, compliance, and active decision-making. Along the way, they have undergone ethical dilemmas and carceral escapes, sought assistance, confronted self-doubts, and grappled with mental health issues. They have embraced opportunities to acquire new skills and enhance their language and digital capacities and endured the trials and solace offered by *sabar* practices. Their journeys of self-becoming involve a deeply layered process characterized by perseverance, transformation, and the pursuit of a more stable and fulfilling life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

This thesis presents a theory of ethical self-becoming through an examination of how it is experienced by migrant South Asian women who arrive alone in the United Kingdom. It explores the process of self-becoming among such women through their (re)positioning across repeated life challenges, such as broken transnational marriages, domestic abuse, mental health struggles, deportation threats, destitution, the fight for legal UK residency, and settling in the country as single women without their natal family nearby. Theories of self-becoming emphasize various aspects of the process, including the role and scope of societal norms and expectations, where the repetition of imposed norms shapes an individual's self-becoming (Butler 1990); violence, which seeps into everyday life, affecting individual subjectivity (Das 2007); conscious self-cultivation through participation in learning groups and outward bodily practices (Mahmood 2005; 2012); connections with non-humans (Solomon 2102); the creation of spaces of normality allowing individuals to reconfigure themselves in the face of challenging sex work (Gutiérrez Garza 2013); or the importance of the company of others, such as in the experience of nuns who uncover who they are by living together (Donnelly 2022). Adding to these discussions, I examine the processes of self-becoming that take place as individuals are (re)positioned in the face of repeated challenging life experiences and multiple ethical dilemmas, leading to shifts in self-becoming. This thesis explores these processes and argues that ethical self-becoming is a shifting, non-linear, reflective, and reactionary process that occurs across (re)positions, within life challenges, and through devotional practices over time and space, with variable outcomes. As part of these processes, joy, faith, hope, despair, courage, and forbearance play a key role both as emotions and as practices of self-becoming.

During my fieldwork, I observed my interlocutors' shifting (re)positions, which led to the development of the concept of 'ethical (re)positioning', an analytical approach designed to investigate this process of self-becoming. Rooted in a cartographic approach, this process provides a means to examine the temporal, spatial, and interweaving forces that shape self-becoming. First, I reconceptualized the notion of 'positioning' (Holland & Leander 2004) as '(re)positioning' to allow for a comprehensive analysis of the social and psychological dimensions of women's experiences as they are (re)positioned across a series of significant life events. I then applied the navigation (Vigh 2009) concept to capture how women contend with shifting personal, interpersonal, and intuitional forces. Furthermore, I used the concept of lamination to shed light on the layers of experience on the basis of which women react and respond in each (re)position. 'Ethical (re)positioning' underscores the dynamic temporal and spatial interplay of structural, interpersonal, and personal forces that influence self-becoming.

I apply the 'ethical (re)positioning' approach to examine the findings emerging from my research. I focus primarily on how women navigate and 'keep going' during their various (re)positions, commencing from the point at which my interlocutors look forward to a 'good marriage', while positioned as young women living with their natal families in their ancestral homelands. My analysis concludes when the women are (re)positioned as single women living on benefits and

transitioning from welfare to work in the United Kingdom after navigating complex challenges during their transnational marital breakdowns. The analysis indicates that self-becoming is a dynamic, unpredictable process with no endpoints or 'fixed arrivals'. It is informed and re-informed by my interlocutors' lived material and pious actions, imaginations, thoughts, and emotions while being situated within a network of interweaving personal, interpersonal, and structural challenges across time and space. It uncovers a dynamic of human malleability, flexibility, resilience, adaptability, strength, challenges, and vulnerabilities, revealing a process of self-becoming that involves a journey through structural and personal challenges, carceral escapes, and multiple ethical dilemmas. In and across the various (re)positions, resilience, forbearance, faith, and compliance interweave with worries and fears as well as joy and relief.

In the beginning, positioned as young brides, these women experience fears, doubts, and a sense of 'hopeful waiting' as they navigate the arduous terrain of their transnational marriages. While still living in their home countries, some women face prolonged delays with their spousal visa applications caused by their UK-based in-laws. In response, to navigate the pressures of upholding their family's reputation, fulfilling kinship obligations, and dealing with these deliberate delays, the women nurture a sense of 'hopeful waiting'. Despite their fears and doubts, they persevere, relying on hope as both a practice and an emotion while sustaining aspirations of marriage and migration. They navigate the complexities of kinship politics, where family honour and relationships take precedence over their own interests and well-being. Amid these pressures, they remain convinced of their ability to work hard and make their marriages work, firmly holding onto this personal belief as they embark on their marriage migration.

In the case of forced marriages, on the other hand, we observe the women submitting, complying, and abiding, while at the same time taking action to achieve their personal aspirations, where possible. They respond with submission and abidance because disobedience is punishable and life-threatening. They accept the suspension of their education and restrictions to their movements, primarily confined to home environments. Although they dislike these forms of control, they have no choice but to comply to avoid punishment and threats to their lives. In the face of these complexities and unable to change their circumstances, the women also remain alert for any opportunities to fulfil their needs and desires. Examples of this include Irum urging her parents to pressure her in-laws to apply for her spousal visa, Shazia soliciting help from a schoolteacher and her elder sister, and all of the women desperately urging their natal families to change their minds. Despite their efforts, however, they are ultimately left with no options and must therefore submit.

When these young women migrate (for some, also an escape because their in-laws had finally secured a spousal visa for them), (re)positioned as migrant brides, they describe arriving feeling both hopeful and apprehensive as they aspire to build a successful marriage. This is nonetheless laminated with layers of doubts and fears. As soon as they arrive in the United Kingdom, their challenges reveal new textures. They find themselves trapped in abusive marriages, forced to live with intimidating husbands and in-laws. In some cases, their parents force them to remain in their marriages. In other cases, they choose to forbear and give their marriages a chance to improve, believing that their situation might eventually stabilize. As they continue to forbear their abuse with no shifts in their circumstances, the women face an ethical dilemma – should they stay or leave?

We have seen that, over time, they find that the situation does not improve. In some cases, in the face of death threats, they react by fleeing their marital homes. In other cases, their husbands hand them over to legal authorities on false claims. In all of these cases, the women act decisively, and regardless of the consequences they must face – such as being disowned by their natal families or being subjected to shame and stigma – they decide not to return to their husbands. Overnight, their decisive action leads to a 'carceral escape'. Although this offers a means to escape abuse, it also leads to their (re)positioning as migrant spouses in broken transnational marriages, forced to navigate threats of deportation and laminations of shame, stigma, and loss of family honour and connection. Although this situation fills them with worry, fear, and precarity, the women choose to remain separate and resist the pressure to return to their marriages. (Re)positioned as separated, single women, they must then fight for their rights to residency in the United Kingdom, driven by their desire to avoid the shame, stigma, abuse, and destitution that a return to their marriages or homelands would entail.

(Re)positioned in legal terms as victims of domestic abuse, we observe how these women fight for the right to remain in the United Kingdom or to obtain refugee status. The challenging consequences of their carceral escapes persist, and they are faced with a dual struggle. On the one hand, they are subjected to a long, arduous wait while living in women's refuges or rooms within shared housing provided by the UK Home Office. On the other hand, they must bear the feelings of shame and stigma resulting from their broken marriages, which is further laminated with loneliness and fears about their uncertain future. Alongside this, they face legal and economic precarity, the threat of deportation, and the stigma of being a divorcee back home, which together leads to mental health challenges.

We hear how the hardship of waiting is relieved when they are granted the right to remain in the United Kingdom, relieving them of the threat of deportation. However, (re)positioned as legal residents, they must then fend for themselves. The effects of their carceral experiences extend into this phase. Being deprived of educational opportunities and confined indoors during their abusive marriages leaves the women ill-prepared to navigate life independently in the early settlement phase. They are acutely aware of their limited English proficiency, minimal digital skills, and lack of familiarity with UK life and its bureaucratic processes, which contributes to a lack of self-confidence.

Notwithstanding this lamination of difficult experiences and low confidence, to avoid destitution, the women summon the courage to actively solicit both ad hoc and formal assistance from experts in designated official spaces and non-experts they meet in their everyday lives, whom I term 'informal go-betweens'. They approach these 'informal go-betweens' to help them navigate issues such as homelessness and poverty, divorce processes, and managing banking and travel challenges. They also actively contact them to help carry out urgent e-service procedures and navigate the UK's bureaucratic systems. They solicit this help, even though such encounters can be either positive or damaging, because of their fear of the severe consequences they could face if they do not complete these processes, including homelessness, destitution, and punitive suspensions of their benefits.

(Re)positioned as benefits recipients, the women must then transition from welfare to work. Despite having had little or no intention of seeking employment in this country and facing the challenges of their inadequate educational achievements, lack of work experience, and absence of a CV, some of the women learn English to transition to employment. Others attempt to enter the job market by gaining work experience. They experience the UK's welfare state as carceral, not only because of sanctions or surveillance, but because the support it offers is conditional, impersonal, and structured through bureaucratic systems that often feel coercive and punitive. These processes impose undue stress and reflect a rigid, unrealistic expectation that overlooks personal barriers. Although they suffer from low confidence and a lack of experience, they approach these tasks with courage, recognizing that transitioning from welfare to work are essential to building their confidence and attaining independence.

To keep going through each (re)position, the women rely on their faith – a practice shaped by their socialization and lived experiences. They practise faith and forbearance, emphasizing the balance between human effort and trust in divine guidance and support. In difficult moments, they take decisive action and change course while simultaneously placing complete trust in and reliance on Allah. While this belief does provide them with some solace, they still despair and struggle to remain calm. Consequently, they interpret and perform their faith on a personal level, shaped by their life's challenges and individual faith capacities and practices.

I chose to embark on this research project after hearing about the challenges and struggles women face after arriving in the United Kingdom and experiencing broken marriages while I was working at a national refugee centre. Although these women are in a different place now, their circumstances were notably different when I began my fieldwork. Irum, as I have described, was confined in a situation of domestic servitude. The law had recently ruled that Shazia's family had trafficked her. Lubna had lost her immigration case twice and was living without legal rights in the United Kingdom. Although separated, Farah kept up the front of being married to avoid the shame and stigma that would otherwise ensue. Fatima was struggling to gain legal rights, and Razia and Saira were trying to settle into life as single women in the United Kingdom. When I met with Bilquis and asked her to join my research project, she reached out, took my hands, clutched them tight, and looked tearfully into my eyes. She said, '*Baji*, I am broken. I have lost my unborn baby, and my marriage and home are destroyed. I have lost everything. I am all alone. If a bus runs me over, no one will know, and no one will come to my funeral'.

Along with 'ethical (re)positionings', the second major concept I developed in the thesis is of 'carceral escapes'. This approach helped me understand what is at stake in the recurring challenges women face during multiple life events. I relied upon human geographers Moran *et al.*'s (2018) definition of the carceral as a subjective experience of intended detriment within specific spaces. I also drew upon the discourse on escape theory, particularly the work of Heatherton and Baumeister (1991), which posits that escape outcomes can be both intended and unintended, varying from relief to non-relief. By juxtaposing the binaries of the carceral and escape, I adopted Ortner's (2016: 65) approach, which advocates for examining how conflicting notions actively interact with one another, thus revealing their potential to limit, shape, and transform one another.

The concept of 'carceral escapes' has shed light on my interlocutors' repeated carceral experiences, helping me to trace how escaping from one challenging situation often leads to new structures of control, whether social, legal, familial, or economic. The concept of carceral escapes offers a productive analytical lens to understand the complexities of broken transnational marriages. First, it illuminates the recurring nature of structural and interpersonal carceral experiences that occur over consecutive life events across time and geographies, revealing that these experiences are enforced by institutions and social actors in interlinking ways within spaces and with enduring effects. For example, it exposes the unabating challenges of forced marriage, domestic abuse, deportation threats, and destitution faced by the women in this study, underscoring the violent interweaving of transnational and national bureaucratic processes, which Smadar Lavie (2014) terms 'bureaucratic torture', and familial institutions to carceral ends.

Second, it highlights the effects of one carceral experience seeping into the next, for instance in relation to the continued presence and impact of shame, stigma, and the trauma of abuse in the body and minds of women across different life events. Third, it offers a means through which to examine the embeddedness of the carceral in the fabric of escapes, which negates the notion of a true escape, instead revealing how an escape interlocks into another manifestation of the carceral in the following context. For example, in forced marriages, domestic and institutional forces interweave when the women's in-laws purposefully delay spousal visa applications. Equally, for these women, escaping domestic abuse leads to broken transnational marriages, abandonment, and threats of deportation. Fourth, it points to the intended and unintended outcomes of each carceral escape, where the individual can face repeated or diminishing carcerality. For instance, some of the women continue to suffer from mental health problems and live in a refuge or have re-entered a toxic relationship, while others are now in new marital relationships. The carceral escapes concept provides a useful method for reevaluating and deepening our understanding of kinship dynamics, gender relations, migration patterns, the realities of broken transnational marriages, UK immigration policies, and transnational social life until they escape these carceral conditions (Moran *et al.* 2018).

A third concept I have developed is of 'multiple ethical dilemmas', according to which individuals' responses are frequently reactive and unpredictable, driven by the imperative to 'keep going', while at other times they are reflective and difficult. The concept of 'multiple moral dilemmas' raised questions as to how people cope and make difficult choices in the face of consecutive, overwhelming conditions, such as abuse, precarious legal status, destitution, poor education, or family and social connections. It provides a space to study how people navigate such overwhelming events from an ethical perspective, including by engaging in desperate acts of self-harm or overdose as a form of relief.

Utilizing these different conceptual frameworks has enabled me to offer a distinctive analysis of UK-South Asian transnational marriage migration, particularly in the context of the current political climate, anti-immigrant sentiment, and the results of the 2012 punitive UK immigration rules. It helps to fill the gap in research on separated or divorced South Asian migrant brides who have faced domestic abuse, deportation, and destitution, and for whom returning home is not an option. They opt to remain in the United Kingdom and contend with living alone in a host country without the support of their natal family nearby. It also provides an ethnography of women who

migrate alone to the United Kingdom with limited language and digital skills and little familiarity with local systems and bureaucratic services. In so doing, this study offers novel insights into how South Asian women survive alone in a new country, where they withdraw from their kin and community owing to shame and stigma. In addition, this study challenges normative assumptions that UK South Asians primarily live surrounded and supported by communal networks.

Finally, this thesis offers insights into the anthropology of ethics. It does this by examining Muslim women's ethical self-becoming through lived experiences, reflections, and reactions rather than focusing solely on deliberate self-presentation or self-cultivation – a central theme within the anthropology of Islam. My thesis illuminates the personal understandings of morality and ethical action of these women, encompassing both the religious and secular dimensions, covering a spectrum of experiences as they navigate their ethical challenges, such as hope, despair, forbearance, devotion, compliance, abidance, defiance, resistance, and active support-seeking. The thesis also underscores the intricate interplay between ethical action and devotional practices, and the interconnected, mutually informing nature of religious commitments and ethical behaviours, highlighting that, for the women in question, faith and practical actions shape the process of ethical self-becoming in everyday life.

While scholarly attention in this area has often focused on everyday ethics and heightened moral responsibilities, mainly caregiving-related ones, this study emphasizes the complexity and persistence of the ethical dilemmas experienced by my interlocutors as they endeavour to 'keep going'. Contrary to existing theories of moral dilemmas (Zigon 2007), it demonstrates that these women were often not able to step back to reflect and thoughtfully address their situation. In the face of threats to their lives and intense psychological distress, especially in moments of crisis, their actions were frequently intuitive, reactive, and unpredictable. It also illustrates that, in the face of multiple moral dilemmas, a return to a state of unreflective morality (Zigon 2007) is rare. Indeed, in some cases, the possibility of returning to a place of comfort in the familiar (Zigon 2007) proves nearly impossible.

This thesis is also about an anthropologist's process of self-becoming, serving as a reflective mirror. In what might be described as a journey of many dawns, my interlocutors' experiences frequently held up a mirror to my own. Listening to their worries and fears helped me to see my own. For example, as a daughter-in-law in a joint family system, I constantly served others to please and earn everyone's approval, framing it as my responsibility to nurture and build the family unit. Driven by fear, my habits of caring for others took root when I arrived in the country as a nervous 19-year-old bride in an arranged marriage. This was also shaped by the moral directive that a daughter-in-law must serve and care for everyone, regardless of how others behave or treat her. I came to realize that living in an unempathetic environment from a very young age had left me feeling unloved and suffering from low self-worth. As a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, I continuously put myself last. I realized that I had unintentionally upheld the patriarchy in which I was entrenched.

Eventually, I burnt out, became seriously ill, and had to take a year out of my studies. During that time, I re-evaluated my behaviours, fears, and insecurities. Having lost it, I realized how crucial my health was, and I used it as a justification to stop everything. I realized that I owed it to myself to

live an authentic, fulfilling life. With the support of my nuclear family, I decided to be brave and make some changes. Despite the inevitable gossip, we took the courageous step of moving out of the joint family system. I began to reduce my caring role by learning to say no and prioritizing myself. It took 3.5 years to rebuild my health. Today, I am more self-aware; I can manage my emotions better and show up authentically without fear. We continue to maintain close relationships with the extended family. However, at times, I still experience pangs of guilt, worry about what people might say, and suffer with bouts of anxiety. Overall, my family and I are in a much better place; we are learning to be more authentic and fair-minded while working towards establishing more equitable gender roles.

Since completing my fieldwork, I have continued to regularly visit my interlocutors and observe their ongoing journeys of self-becoming. These trajectories reveal that carceral escapes are rarely clean breaks; rather, they shift from one configuration of detriment, intention, and spatiality (Moran et al. 2018) into another, with varied outcomes across life stages.

For example, although leaving Aisha's home freed Irum from her control, in council accommodation with other female claimants she experienced severe bullying that damaged her mental health. She had escaped one set of carceral conditions only to fall into another. With the help of a national NGO for trafficked individuals with whom she was registered, she moved into a women's refuge, where she still lives. The refuge and I helped her apply for and receive PIP. It also offers free English, yoga, and singing classes, and volunteering in a bakery. Her skills and mental health have improved, showing how spatial changes can ease some carceral conditions while reproducing others, such as institutional dependencies. Irum feels her family do not understand her challenges living alone; while her mother and siblings accept her marital status, her father does not. Yet she now describes herself as more assertive, confident, and independent, no longer allowing family opinion to affect her. These shifts mark steps in her ethical (re)positioning, though strained ties with her father signal the persistence of earlier relational carceral conditions. With the refuge's help, she plans to move into a council flat and live independently.

Shazia's trajectory reflects similar tensions. The council rehoused her in a one-bedroom flat and she found work as a kitchen assistant through a GP's reference. Although her housing and financial precarity have eased, she continues to struggle with poor mental health, highlighting the seepage of embodied trauma from earlier abuse. She left her job to focus on GCSEs, which she passed with an E grade. These were positive steps, yet her mental health has deteriorated. She is now seeking part-time work and has ended a toxic relationship with an older male classmate who helped her with classwork. With her GP and my support, she applied for and was granted PIP. In her case, benefits provide financial support, but poor health keeps her tied to bureaucratic rules, and she lives in fear of losing PIP.

Farah, whose English was poor during fieldwork, has improved significantly. Although she repeatedly said she could never trust a man or remarry, she is now married to a UK citizen. As of December 2024, they live in a one-bedroom flat with their three-year-old daughter and newborn son. Farah says, '*Alhamdulillah*; I am happy and well settled in my marriage'. Razia, always timid and quiet during fieldwork, also insisted she would never remarry. Although her writing was good, she spoke little English. On my last visit she conversed in English, seemed happy and confident,

and was married with a daughter. Farah and Razia have moved from carceral conditions into greater stability, though their lives remain framed by feminised kinship roles.

Bilquis's trajectory shows both detriment and renewal. Rebuilding her financial position after poor working conditions, she reconnected with her oldest sister, who introduced her to her husband, Aslam. They live in a studio flat; he is a carpenter and hopes to start a business. Throughout fieldwork Bilquis often said, *'Mujhe mera apna ghar basana hai'* ('I want to be a homemaker and build a home with my husband'). Yet she now loves her supermarket job, takes pride in her capabilities, and feels respected. More confident in her language and digital skills, she still turns to me for help with passports, emails, and complex documents. Her reliance illustrates the enduring imposition by opaque bureaucracies. Although married and in a stable job, her past abuse means her mental health fluctuates impacting her everyday lived experiences of work and marriage.

Fatima's case is less hopeful. When we last spoke, she was in hospital with a heart condition, she was deeply worried about loneliness during recovery. Her situation highlights how isolation, poor health, and memories of earlier carceral experiences can together form new conditions of carcerality for single women.

Lubna's story reflects both state and relational confinement. After periods of homelessness and undocumented life, she met Adil, and they planned to marry. Under family pressure he briefly withdrew from marriage, leaving her homeless again. Eventually he defied his mother's wishes, they married, and Lubna secured her right to remain in the United Kingdom. She admits she can never fully trust men. A painful reconnection with her sister reminded her of the shame and family ostracism tied to her marital breakdown. She remains disconnected from her natal family. Yet she says, '*Alhamdulillah*, I am feeling happier, more secure, and enjoying my part-time job as a chef, but for me, scars from marital breakdown, immigration struggles, and family rejection endure'.

Saira struggled with severe mental health challenges during her toxic divorce, relying on medication and therapy. Following settlement, she regained her strength, eased into work through volunteering, and is now employed as a GP receptionist, soon to begin an NHS 111 role. She has applied for a master's degree and continues to pursue education and career development, for which I provide references. Her trajectory illustrates gradual repositioning from carceral conditions toward stability.

Across these cases, women's movements, from abusive marriages to refuges, from undocumented status to legal residency, from destitution to paid work, are emblematic of the recursive dynamics of carceral escape. Each shift offers partial relief, carrying over some constraints, while embedding new ones, through institutional regulation, interpersonal relationships, or gendered expectations.

Every visit reminds me of the evolving nature of self-becoming. Despite progress, both Irum and Shazia continue to face mental health challenges. Shazia once hoped to join the police force but decided against applying due to her health. Lubna, though degree-educated, accepted low-wage work to secure some independence. Bilquis, after conflict with a landlord who falsely accused her, struggled to find decent housing. These examples reveal how self-becoming across carceral escapes

is non-linear, reflective, and reactionary. Outcomes vary, with joy, faith, hope, despair, courage, and forbearance all serving as emotions and practices of self-becoming.

Through the conceptual framework of 'ethical (re)positioning', 'carceral escapes' and 'multiple moral dilemmas' this thesis underscores that self-becoming is neither a definitive 'arrival' nor an endpoint; instead, it is an ongoing, non-linear, reflective, reactionary process influenced by punitive structural forces, both legal and familial. The journey is shaped by human malleability, resilience, strength, and vulnerabilities, fluctuating across time and space. In these women's cases, (re)positions across challenges and punitive structures are modes of self-becoming that uncover personal and interpersonal (im)possibilities, (un)becoming, and (under)growth, where forces act as both constraints and opportunities, which is an inevitable part of the ongoing process of self-becoming.

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