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Globalization, Sharia Law, and Cultural Hybridity: A Case of Marriage Preferences of Young Bangladeshis

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Abstract

This contribution is one of the few psychological studies analyzing the marriage preferences of Bangladeshi urban youths. Our goal was to demonstrate that the line between traditional and "modern" marriage is no longer clear-cut and document the importance of social status and religion in shaping the life priorities of young, educated Bangladeshis. The sample (N = 205) consisted of unmarried university undergraduates aged 19-26. Participants were presented with three marriage scenarios: a traditional marriage arrangement, a hybrid model based on mutual attraction and family support, and finally, a Western-style love marriage. Generally, the Western marriage arrangements were rated more positively than the other models. Surprisingly, there were no significant differences between preferences for a hybrid and a traditional model. Additionally, participants from a higher social milieu with lower levels of religiosity accepted love marriages more eagerly than middle-class students.

Keywords

globalization, mate selection, love, religiosity, socio-economic status

> **Highlights**
> - We present the first psychological study focusing solely on the marriage preferences of Bangladeshi urban youths.
> - Our goal was to demonstrate that the psychological effects of globalization in South Asia could be more complicated than is usually assumed.
> - We also document the importance of social status and religion in the shaping of life priorities of young Bangladeshis.
> - The results show that Western marriage arrangements were rated more positively than the Traditional or the Hybrid models.
> - Participants from a higher social milieu with lower levels of religiosity accepted love marriages more eagerly than middle-class students.

Since the early 1990s, the societies of South Asia have been increasingly subjected to the pressures of modernization. New models of consumption, family arrangements, and leisure have been introduced mostly by electronic media. In urban Bangladesh, the technology of multi-channel TV had already been introduced in 1991 (Zahid, 2007). However, despite the rising exposure to the Western lifestyle and values, there has been a strong resistance against these new ideals, especially in more conservative communities (Derné, 2005; Walle, 1998). In Bangladesh, even some academics complain that globalization constitutes a threat "to the survival of culture, community norms, ethics, and values" (cf. Shahen et al., 2019, p. 33).

However, a direct effect of globalization may be overrated, especially when it comes to old customs and traditions. In India, individuals often prefer the involvement of parents in the decision to select a spouse rather than it being solely their own choice due to parental knowledge and wisdom, which is believed to ensure marriage stability (cf. Derné, 2005; Medora, 2003; Soy & Sahoo, 2016).

According to a 2016 Indian national survey (Sampath, 2017), over 84% of married young adults (aged 18-34) had an arranged marriage. Arranged marriage was also the preference among the unmarried, with only 12% expressing a preference for "love marriage".

Also, in Bangladesh, the vast majority of marriages are still arranged by parents (Amin & Das, 2013; El-Saharty, Zunaid-Ahsan, & May, 2014). However, nowadays, the young generation generally has more to say in a spouse selection process than their parents. Amin and Das (2013) presented survey results in Bangladesh on a nationally representative sample; overall, 35 percent of all the women interviewed said they had some say in a husband's choice when they were first married. Among older women (above age 45), the proportion was 20 percent compared to 52 percent for younger women (under age 25).

In our opinion, to fully understand the ongoing changes in marital arrangements in South East Asia, we have to go beyond the simplistic binaries of "arranged" and "love" marriages. In a traditional arranged marriage, parents identify, screen, and select a mate for their son or daughter. This type of arrangement is still prevalent in rural Bangladesh. Still, in urban settings, the children often play an important role in mate selection by providing input about the qualities of his/her desirable mate. Also, so-called "love" marriages are seldom Western-style unions, but rather local variations characterized not only by mutual affection but also by the importance of parental support and family approval (Bhandari, 2017; Donner, 2016). As Bhandari (2017) puts it: "These experiences can often be described as "love-cum-arranged" marriages as a self-chosen alliance turns into marriage only after parental approval" (p. 2). In their recent study on marriage quality among young Bangladeshi couples, Flicker and her colleagues (2020) prefer the term couple-initiated marriages instead of speaking of love marriages.

A similar transformation of the marital tradition is also observed in East Asia. In an analysis of contemporary Korean family arrangements, Baldacchino (2008) demonstrates that most so-called "love marriages" - which are favored by the current modernization narrative - are hybrid forms that encompass the elements of traditional arrangements as Western practices. They do not easily fit into the category of "love marriages" and could be described as "half-arranged and half-love marriages [jungmae ban yeonae ban]" (Baldacchino, 2008; Kim, 1993). Cultural hybridity, not Westernization, is probably the most typical outcome of globalization, at least in the personal and interpersonal sphere (cf. Melluish, 2014).

In Bangladesh, similarly as in India, preference for such cultural hybrids could be expected in urban settings among well-educated and usually well to do young people. Even there, the resistance towards new courtship practices and marital arrangements might be quite strong. Contrary to most of the studies focused on marital arrangements in Bangladesh, we decided to analyze young unmarried people's preferences, not actual practices. We found only one similar study (Peterson et al., 2011). However, Peterson et al. (2011) asked participants about their attitudes about arranged marriages and the importance of emotional connection. In concordance with the new approach to studying marital arrangements in South East Asia (e.g., Bhandari, 2017; Donner, 2016; Flicker et al., 2020; Sharangpani, 2010), we decided to widen our framework by including a cultural hybrid, i.e., "love-cum-arrange" marriages. We also decided that even Western-style love marriages in a strict sense are hardly possible in a conservative Muslim society; it would be interesting to check their attractiveness in young people's eyes. In short, we planned to ask young Bangladeshi how attractive they found each of the following options: 1) traditional, arranged marriage, 2) "love-cum-arranged" marriage, and 3) Western-style love marriage. We found no study using a similar framework.

Our ultimate goal was to identify the social and demographic factors that may contribute to forming personal attitudes towards different marriage scenarios. Summarizing

his research, Ahmed (1986) noted that in Bangladesh, the attitude towards arranged marriages depends on social, cultural, economic, and religious factors. In our research, we decided to focus on social status, religiosity, and gender as potential determinants of marriage preferences. In the following sections, we will present the rationale for each of these choices.

Social Class

Social class and status can influence attitude towards tradition and dictate behavior patterns in certain situations, for instance, towards arranged marriages. However, the relationship between social class and attitudes towards arranged marriage might be quite complicated. From the perspective of parents coming from privileged families, irrespective of their marriage history, an arranged marriage probably constitutes the best option because it gives them the best chances to secure their family's status. Love marriage is viewed as economically risky and potentially less stable, especially as, in the last decade, divorce rates have risen significantly, not only in India but also in Bangladesh (Patoari, 2020).

According to Zahid's (2007) study, 70.4% of the upper-class youth from Dhaka prefer love marriage over an arranged marriage. They have probably been exposed to globalization pressures much more than their counterparts from lower classes, not only through media but also from their own experience (travel, education, etc.). In contrast to lower class youths, they might also perceive the Western style of courting and marriage patterns as available options in the Bangladeshi context. Consequently, it was hypothesized that Bangladeshi youths from higher social strata would have a higher preference for love marriage than their lower class counterparts.

Religiosity

Bangladesh is relatively homogenous as the ethnic and cultural majority of the population is Muslim (90%), with the majority being Sunni. It should be noted that Muslim communities generally have a firm attachment to traditions and customs. Although Bangladesh has a secular constitution, marriage, divorce, alimony, and property inheritance are regulated by Sharia - religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition. There are also regulations regarding proper courting practices. According to Islamic principles, the prospective couple may engage in some approved gestures and practices such as exchanging gifts, but touching, kissing, and hugging are strictly prohibited. It is widely believed that such intimacy leads directly to "unlawful sexual intercourse" (cf. Rabiu, Ibrahim, & Sa'ad, 2019, p. 126). In the contemporary world of new technologies, even virtual intimacy is suspicious. In their analysis of Islamic principles on courtship Rabiu, Ibrahim, and Sa'ad (2019, p. 127) observe: "All Shariah restrictions to be respected by a

potential couple in physical interaction during courtship are to be observed over phone calls or social media chat."

Moreover, religious Muslims often regard passionate love as lustful and as a sign of weak character; the best known Koranic passages on "passion" are those that emphasize its links to the doing of evil (Peletz, 1996; Walle, 1998). Research shows that followers of Islam when compared with Hindus, express more conservative attitudes towards arranged marriages (e.g., Praksa & Rao, 1979). Modood and Berthoud (1997), who compared the followers of Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam, found that the most significant percentage of arranged marriages was among Muslim followers (among women close to 90%). There was also a positive correlation between the level of religiosity and acceptance of the tradition of arranged marriages. Sharif (1985), who studied marital arrangements in Pakistan, found that arranged marriages are more common in rural areas and among less educated people, and strongly linked with the level of religiosity. Consequently, it was hypothesized that people with high levels of religiosity would favor the tradition of arranged marriages more strongly than their less religious counterparts. Highly religious individuals should also be less attracted to love marriages and "love-cum-arranged" marriages.

Gender

According to Indian American social scientist Mukta Sharangpani (2010), "The arranged marriage system is a patriarchal artifact invested in maintaining caste purity, class privileges and gender hierarchy" (pp. 270–271). From a woman's perspective, arranged marriage tradition might be seen as particularly oppressive when she is offered no freedom of choice. It is often true of the less educated population of the countryside, where forced marriages are still an everyday occurrence, and approximately 66 percent of girls are married before they reach the legal age of 18 (Abdullah, Qureshi, & Quayes, 2015). However, it is debatable if urban middle and upper-class women would necessarily perceive the practice of arranged marriage as equally oppressive, especially as the tradition has changed significantly over the past two decades. At least in the upper social strata, women can voice their preferences freely or veto parents' choices. In the Peterson et al. (2011) study, female undergraduates from Dhaka were more accepting of arranged marriage than their male colleagues.

On the other hand, the love marriage scenario (mostly due to unsupervised dating) might represent a real threat given the high premium placed on female chastity (Abraham, 2002; Rashid & Michaud, 2000). Suppose a man loses interest in the process of dating or from the beginning does not intend to marry. In that case, the woman might be categorized as "indecent" and become unsuitable for marriage due to this failed attempt. Male marriage preferences are also not apparent. For those coming from conservative families and maintaining traditional masculine values, love marriage would probably not be an option. As Walle (1998) put it, summing up his research in Pakistan: "Marrying out

of love is definitely *not* a masculine venture. Seen from different angles, a love-marriage is a display of a man's weak character: marrying out of love may be seen by some as succumbing to one's desires, thus displaying bad conduct as a Muslim." Considering all these complexities, we did not make any predictions regarding the relationship between gender and marriage preferences.

Summing up our hypotheses, we expected that Bangladeshi youths from higher social strata would have a higher preference for love marriage than their counterparts from the lower classes; we also expected that highly religious individuals should also be less attracted to love and "love-cum-arranged" marriages.

Method

Participants

The vast majority of the participants (*N* = 205) declared themselves as Muslim, and data from four Hindu participants were excluded from further analyses. We also excluded data from four married persons. The final sample (*N* = 197) consisted of 99 women and 98 men. Age of participants ranged between 19-26 years (*M* = 21.20, *SD* = 1.50).

The participants were undergraduates from two universities in Bangladesh: BRAC University in Dhaka and Rajshahi University in Rajshahi, a major urban and industrial center of North Bengal. We chose BRAC University because it is one of the most prestigious universities in Bangladesh, attended mostly by students from the upper class, as opposed to Rajshahi University, where the majority of students are of middle-class origin. Also, being a student and later graduate of the more elitist BRAC University is connected with a higher social status than being a student of Rajshahi University. Moreover, Dhaka, a capital city with a population of 20 million, is usually regarded as a "more liberal" environment than Rajshahi. This assumption has been partially supported by Amin and Das (2013), who found significant regional differences in the way arranged marriages are navigated in these two cities. In Rajshahi, only 19.7 percent of young married women (under age 25) declared that they had some say in their partner's choice, while in Dhaka, this figure rose to 29.5 percent.

Measures and Procedure

To assess students' marriage preferences, we used the vignette method. The vignettes were prepared in Bengali and verified by native speakers. Capitalizing on the existing research on modernization of the arranged marriage tradition (e.g., Baldacchino, 2008), we decided that, apart from the Western and traditional scenarios, we should also present our participants with a hybrid model. While there are various hybrid combinations, we decided on a specific scenario that was identified in the pilot study as the most

culturally relevant. Each participant was presented with one of three vignettes describing distinctive marriage scenarios:

- *Scenario 1:* Western model of marriage – future spouses meet during an official event organized at their university and start dating. Eventually, they decide to marry;
- *Scenario 2:* Hybrid model ("love-cum-arranged" marriage) – future spouses meet during a traditional party organized by their families and have a chance to discuss their plans for the future. The attraction is mutual, and soon they turn to their families for approval and get their consent;
- *Scenario 3:* Traditional model – the first meeting is arranged by parents. After a formal introduction, the young people are given a little time to discuss their future, with both having faith in their parents' experience in matchmaking.

Participants were asked to evaluate their attitude towards the scenario (α = .86, "Would you like to conclude the matrimony in such a way?" "Do you think that the marriage of people who have met in the discussed circumstances can be long-lasting?", "Do you think that the marriage of people who have met in the discussed circumstances can be successful?"). They answered this question using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree.*

Religiosity was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = *definitely not a religious person* and 5 = *definitely a religious person.*

Since most of the participants were not used to questionnaire studies or social surveys and quite hesitant to share personal information such as family income, etc., social class was assessed using a self-description measure. Participants were asked to indicate whether they consider themselves lower, middle or upper class. The majority (53%) of students from BRAC University described themselves as upper-class, 44% as middle class, and only 3% as lower class. Contrastingly, the majority (70%) of Rajshahi University students were middle class, 20% identified themselves as lower class, and only 10% as upper class. We originally planned to assign participants to three separate groups (upper, middle, and lower class) according to their self-descriptions. It proved to be impossible due to the uneven distribution, with the vast majority of students declaring themselves as middle class. Instead, we decided to compare the attitudes of participants from the two universities (BRAC University and Rajshahi University). Thus, we treat the university as a social milieu with specific social values and norms affecting students' attitudes. In the case of BRAC University, these values would be more consistent with upper-class sentiments, while at Rajshahi University, predominantly middle class or lower middle class. Consequently, we will refer to the students from BRAC University as participants from the higher social milieu, and the students from Rajshahi as participants from the middle-class milieu.

A study was conducted in class. Informed consent was obtained, and all participants were monetarily compensated.

Results

Three items formed our dependent variable, which was acceptance towards marriage style. These items were: "Would you like to conclude the matrimony in such a way?" "Do you think that the marriage of people who have met in the discussed circumstances can be long-lasting?", "Do you think that the marriage of people who have met in the discussed circumstances can be successful?". The internal consistency of the index was very high at α = .86.

First we conducted an ANOVA analysis with index of acceptance of marriage as the dependent variable and type of scenario as an independent variable. The results showed that there were significant differences in the acceptance of marriage model depending on the scenario, $F(2, 194) = 4.50$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The Western model was found to be more acceptable ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.41$), than the Hybrid model ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.57$), $p = .024$ or the Traditional model ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.55$), $p = .040$. There were no significant differences in acceptance of the Traditional and Hybrid model of marriage, $p > .999$.

In a second step, we conducted a regression analysis with social milieu (1 = higher social milieu, 0 = middle social milieu), religiousness, and dummy coded type of marriage as the explanatory variables. We used the hybrid model as the reference group. The index of acceptance of the marriage model was the outcome variable. The analysis was conducted using Hayes (2013) PROCESS macro. The results showed that such a model fit the data well, $F(11, 185) = 3.38$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .17$. There was a trend indicating that higher social milieu participants were less accepting of Traditional vs. Hybrid models of marriage. There was also a significant three-way interaction between religiousness, social milieu, and acceptance of the Western vs. Hybrid marriage model (see Table 1).

Table 1

Results of Multiple Regression Analysis With Acceptance of Marriage Model as the Outcome Variable

Predictor	b	t	p
Constant	4.57	24.20	< .001
Western model vs. Hybrid model	0.26	0.89	.375
Traditional model vs Hybrid model	0.09	0.31	.761
Social milieu	-0.21	-0.54	.587
Western model vs. Hybrid model x Social milieu	0.09	0.15	.884
Traditional model vs. Hybrid model x Social milieu	-0.95	-1.68	.095
Religiousness	0.13	0.70	.485
Western model vs. Hybrid model x Religiousness	0.06	0.20	.841
Traditional model vs. Hybrid model x Religiousness	0.05	0.17	.867
Social Milieu x Religiousness	0.01	0.03	.976
Western model vs. Hybrid model x Social Milieu x Religiousness	-1.49	-2.44	.016
Traditional model vs. Hybrid model x Social Milieu x Religiousness	0.14	0.25	.801

Test of highest order unconditional interactions was significant, $F(2, 185) = 3.73$, $p = .026$, $R^2 = .03$. Test of conditional interaction between Western vs. Hybrid Model and Social Milieu at low (3) and high (5) values of religiousness indicates that the interaction was significant at low values of religiousness, $F(2, 185) = 3.53$, $p = .031$ and not at high values of religiousness, $F(2, 185) = 1.41$, $p = .247$. Zeroing in on the interaction at low levels of religiousness, we found that it was above all higher social milieu individuals that were more accepting of Western vs. Hybrid model of marriage, $b = 1.19$, $t(185) = 2.67$, $p = .008$[1].

Discussion and Final Remarks

This contribution is the first psychological study focusing solely on the marriage preferences of Bangladeshi urban youths. Our goal was to demonstrate how globalization influences young people's life goals. Overall, the Western model appears to be an attractive option for young Bangladeshi students; however, demographic variables play an important role in shaping participants' individual preferences.

Generally, Western marriage arrangements were rated more positively than the other models. Surprisingly, there were no significant differences between preferences for a hybrid model and a traditional model. Consistently with our predictions, religiosity and the social status appeared to be very important factors shaping individual's marriage preferences. Participants from a higher social milieu with lower levels of religiosity accepted love marriages more eagerly than middle-class students. It seems that religiosity plays the role of a buffer - even when the social status is relatively high (educated middle class), adherence to religious values may prevent people from accepting the Western method of marriage arrangement. This effect might be exclusive to the Muslim population, being more in favor of arranged marriage than Hindus or Sikhs (e.g., Praksa & Rao, 1979).

We found no significant gender differences in marriage preferences. We think that this might be because our sample consisted of middle and upper-class students mainly, where gender differences may be less pronounced. It is also possible that even in this privileged section of society, religion plays a unifying role and prevents women from verbalizing their specific preferences if they are inconsistent with Sharia law. This issue deserves further study, also with the use of qualitative methods like in-depth interviews.

The present study is not representative of Bangladeshi society as a whole. Future studies should also include more diverse samples. It should also be emphasized that we studied only preferences, not actual behavior. At least partially, that may explain why love marriage was significantly more popular than the hybrid model among participants

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1) Including gender in the analysis does not change the results. Gender did not have a significant effect on acceptance of marriage, $p = .453$. We also checked interactions between type of marriage model, religiousness and social milieu and found no significant effects.

from a higher social milieu even though it is a much less realistic option. It is impossible to predict how many of these young people will marry according to their declared preferences; a variable of crucial importance here is parental approval of the marriage. When planning future research, we recommend a longitudinal design, which allows the consistency between marriage preferences and chosen marriage scenarios to be explored.

Data Availability: For this article, a dataset is freely available (Szarota, Rahman, & Cantarero, 2021).

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the research data for this study (for access see Index of Supplementary Materials below).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Szarota, P., Rahman, E., & Cantarero, K. (2021). *Supplementary materials to "Globalization, Sharia law, and cultural hybridity: A case of marriage preferences of young Bangladeshis"* [Research data]. PsychOpen GOLD. https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.4704

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