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## **British Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, Higher Education and Defensive Othering**

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**Abstract:** Despite the rapid increase in the numbers of Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls entering higher education, practitioners of widening participation (WP) interventions continue to focus on access, under the mistaken belief that both groups have a strong cultural prevalence for early marriage and motherhood, have low attainment levels, or lack sufficient or effective careers guidance to help inform their academic or career choices. While more recent research has set out to challenge these stereotypes, there remains a paucity of research exploring the experiences of those who have successfully made the transition into, through and beyond higher education (HE). As a result, these stereotypical perspectives continue to prevail.

This qualitative study examines the ways in which young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women have not only absorbed these stereotypical views but also, explicitly and implicitly, use stereotyping to define themselves in opposition to those women they deem 'unsuccessful'. In adopting a position of 'defensive othering', taken in opposition to what they perceive to be 'your typical Asian', the women also position themselves as the Other. Drawing upon interviews with young women, we explore how the tensions between constructions of identity and the use of stereotypes from within their communities reveal some of the emotional difficulties they encounter in accessing both higher education and the workplace. Our paper therefore has importance for policy makers and academics involved in widening participation and student progression activities.

**Key words:** BRITISH PAKISTANI, BRITISH BANGLADESHI, YOUNG WOMEN, GENDER, OTHERING, INEQUALITY, WIDENING PARTICIPATION, IDENTITY, SOCIAL MOBILITY, STEREOTYPING, HIGHER EDUCATION, LABOUR MARKET

### **Background and context: the educational attainment of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in the UK**

In the 2011 UK census, 447,201 people identified as Bangladeshi and 1,124,511 as Pakistani. The two groups are often referred to together in both literature and policy documents, despite the fact that there are many differences between them. Not only are their countries of origin quite different but they also have distinct cultural identities as British Pakistanis or British Bangladeshis.

There are also significant geographical, linguistic, social and educational differences between the two groups. For example, while over 50% of the Bangladeshi population live in London, those of Pakistani heritage are more geographically dispersed, settling in the West Midlands, London, the Yorkshire region and the northwest of England. There are also differences in school-age attainment: 61.3% of children of Bangladeshi heritage achieve five or above GCSEs (or equivalent) at grades A\*–C (above the national average of 56.6%) whereas only 51.4% of children of Pakistani heritage do so (DfE, 2014).

There are, however, also similarities between the two groups. Both British Pakistanis and British Bangladeshis are likely to be living in persistent poverty (Fisher and Nandi, 2015) and relative poverty, with 57% of Pakistanis and 46% of Bangladeshis doing so compared to 16% of the white British population (Li and Heath, 2015; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). Both groups are also more likely to be living in overcrowded housing and have poorer health than those who are white British (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). In addition, the unemployment rate is highest for people from a Bangladeshi background (15%), followed by those from a Pakistani background (10%), compared to an overall UK rate of 4% (Powell, 2018). These numbers are particularly high for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, who experience high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity (Powell, 2018) For older Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, this has largely been attributed to a lack of English language skills and low education levels (Dale, 2002), resulting in low social, academic or workforce integration.

Following the Casey (2016) review into social cohesion in the UK, the perceived lack of integration of British Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (with Muslim women often used as a proxy), commonly attributed to low levels of employment, has recently been a topic of extensive public debate and negative media coverage. More recently, for example, following the launch of the government's Race Disparity Unit, an 'unnamed source' close to the Cabinet Office claimed that 'Pakistani women who don't speak English or go out to work are living in an entirely different society and are shockingly badly integrated' (Oliphant, 2017).

These arguments are, in fact, both outdated and have little contemporary salience. Although Muslim women in the UK are more likely than all other women to be economically inactive because of household obligations, with

18% of Muslim women aged 16–74 recorded as ‘looking after home and family’ compared with 6% of the overall population (Muslim Council of Britain, 2015), they are statistically well represented in UK higher education. Since the first ‘pioneer’ generation of young British Pakistani and Bangladeshi women to go to university in the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the number of girls entering higher education (Bagguley and Hussain, 2007; Dale, 2002; Niven, Faggian and Ruwanpura, 2012; Shaw et al., 2016), and amongst the increasing numbers of minority ethnic women applying to universities since 1994, the highest growth in applications has been from Bangladeshi and Pakistani young women (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2006, cited in Niven, Faggian and Ruwanpura, 2012).

Moreover, whilst historically Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim women were under-represented compared to their male peers (Connor, Modood and Hillage, 2004; Shiner and Modood, 2002; Taylor, 1993), recent research has shown a significant shift in this once-persistent gender bias (Shaw et al., 2016). Furthermore, Niven, Faggian and Ruwanpura’s 2012 analysis of HESA data found that young British Bangladeshi women were better represented at ‘old’ (i.e. pre-1992) universities than were British Bangladeshi men. These educational gains made by British Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are located within the wider context of educational improvements by young British Muslim women illustrated by Khattab and Modood’s 2017 study, which found that 25% of British Muslim women aged 21–24 had degrees, compared with 22% of British Muslim men of the same age. In other words, whilst older Muslim men are more likely to be degree holders than older Muslim women, younger Muslim women are more likely than their male Muslim peers to have degrees (Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran, 2014).

Although previous research highlighted that a strong cultural prevalence for early marriage and motherhood and low attainment levels, combined with alleged poor or biased careers guidance, acted as major barriers to the participation of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women within further education and the labour market (Dale, 2002; Dale et al. 2002a), more recent evidence has highlighted how, within both communities, higher education is valued highly as a path to upwards social mobility (Bagguley and Hussain, 2007; Shah, Dwyer and Modood, 2010; Basit, 2012). It is problematic, therefore, that both male and female Pakistanis and Bangladeshis remain significantly less likely than their white peers to graduate with a first or upper second-class degree. Of UK-domiciled, first-degree undergraduate qualifiers, only 61.8% of Pakistanis and 64.6% of Bangladeshis gained a first/2:1 compared to 78.4% of white students (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017), with both Pakistani and Bangladeshi female graduates in particular facing a broken promise of social mobility (Shaw et al., 2016; Stevenson et al., 2017). That broken promise arises from the fact that they experience higher levels of

unemployment and receive lower earnings than white British graduates (Dale et al., 2002a; Lindley, 2009; Zwysen and Longhi, 2016; Niven, Faggian and Ruwanpura, 2012). This remains the case even when they graduate with the same degree.

Disparities are found even amongst Russell Group universities, commonly viewed as synonymous with providing access to graduate employment. British Pakistani female graduates, for example, experience higher levels of unemployment and receive lower earnings than their white, female counterparts, even after educational characteristics have been accounted for (Lessard-Phillips et al., 2014). Moreover, despite achieving higher qualifications at school than their male counterparts and/or graduating with a higher degree, female Bangladeshi graduates are less likely to gain managerial and professional roles than male Bangladeshi graduates<sup>1</sup> (Niven, Faggian and Ruwanpura 2012; Shaw et al., 2016). Pakistani and Bangladeshi women thus face persistent disadvantage, both in higher education and in progressing to the workplace, with the causes of such disadvantage remaining under-researched.

## Higher education research and interventions

Despite the rapid and significant increase in the participation of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women within HE (Bagguley and Hussain, 2007; Dale, 2002; Niven, Faggian and Ruwanpura, 2012; Shaw et al., 2016), there has been little focus on their on-campus experiences. This stems in part from – as Ahmad (2007) notes – the historical underrepresentation of Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls in higher education, which has resulted in an emphasis on the views of school girls and their parents. As a result, the research literature has also focused predominantly on, firstly, identifying barriers to accessing higher education, including family pressures (Dale et al., 2002b) and discrimination (Brah and Minhas, 1985; Mac an Ghail, 1988; Shain, 2000), and, secondly, exploring the educational and career aspirations of school girls (Basit, 1996; Basit, 1997; Dwyer and Shah, 2009; Shah, Dwyer and Modood, 2010) and parents (Afshar, 1989; Crozier and Davies, 2006; Crozier and Davies, 2007; Ijaz and Abbas, 2010).

The focus of such research is, of course, important, particularly where it indicates that racism and discrimination are persistent and entrenched. Studies by Modood (2006) and Boliver (2015) into the university application and admissions process, for example, have highlighted the apparent discrimination faced by Pakistani students, who, despite having the same grades as their white counterparts, are less likely to be made offers from Russell Group universities. In addition, Noden, Shiner and Modood (2014), using statistical modelling and controlling for a range of variables,

found that Pakistani students would receive seven additional rejections per 100 compared with white applicants.

## The study<sup>ii</sup>

In January 2015, Study Higher<sup>iii</sup> successfully bid for funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to explore whether there are particular barriers to participation facing Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls and whether different approaches to the information, advice and guidance (IAG) delivered in school or colleges could help students from these groups to make more appropriate subject choices. Subsequently named the Pioneers Project, the project was undertaken between February and December 2016 and was delivered as an action-based research project designed to bridge the gap between WP research, policy and practice by taking an evidence-based approach to developing new outreach activities.

A key purpose of the research element of the project was to identify and explore the perceived barriers faced by young British Pakistani and Bangladeshi female students in Oxfordshire, Reading and High Wycombe (recruitment sites for the universities involved in Study Higher) in attempting to access both higher education and the labour market. The aim was to use findings from the research to inform and develop a new outreach intervention for local secondary-school students from these same communities that would focus not just on access but on access into and progression from higher education.

To achieve this, a qualitative approach to research was taken, for, as Miles and Huberman (1994) note, qualitative research aims to understand how people make sense of their lives and how they come to understand and manage day-to-day situations. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with six women: one prospective student (year 13), four students on course and one post-graduate who had progressed into the labour market. The interviews were designed to explore how the participants determined whether they would enter higher education, understand the key influences and influencers on their subject choice and university choice, and identify perceived and actual barriers to entering and succeeding within higher education and the labour market. The interviews allowed for a set framework of questions to enable the aims of the research to be met whilst offering opportunities for the researchers to pursue individual themes as they developed through the course of each interview.

Requests for participants were circulated through individual teaching departments and the Student Union, whilst details were also advertised via the university's internal research mailing lists and online message boards. Participants were offered a £25 Amazon voucher as an incentive for taking

part in the project. The six participants recruited were of British Pakistani and British Bangladeshi heritage and identified themselves as Muslim. Five had progressed straight from sixth form or college to university and one participant was a mature student.

All participants were interviewed individually in a private space, with all but one interview taking place on the university campus. In line with good-practice use of the thematic-analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ritchie and Lewis, 2010), each interview transcript was read and re-read to draw out themes and commonalities of experience, as well as to identify where these differed. The thematic coding of the interviews elicited a number of perhaps expected findings as well as one unexpected finding: the strategy of defensive othering.

It is important to note here that the overall research project and interviews were conducted and analysed by Farhana Ghaffar, who, as a British-born Pakistani female researcher, occupied an 'insider' status in relation to the participants. As such, her cultural awareness and similarities with the participants encouraged them to speak freely and allowed for a greater depth of exploration of certain barriers throughout the interviews. However, as she is a successful graduate, it may be that the accounts given by the women in this study were in part because they wanted to position themselves as 'like you and not like them'. In an attempt to counter this, the participants were always asked to explore and explain their views and feelings in order to dispel the assumption that, as an Asian female researcher, Ghaffar would immediately know and understand their individual experiences.

## Findings: barriers to higher education and the workplace

Limitation of parental support was a key barrier for those who had parents with a little knowledge of English and/or no experience of attending university either in the UK or abroad. This was identified as a particular barrier to navigating the higher education (HE) system, both pre- and post-application. It is important to note, however, that a lack of practical support and guidance did not mean that parents were critical of their daughters entering HE (contrary to many of the prevailing stereotypes noted above); Anam<sup>iv</sup>, for example, was keen to stress that her parents were very supportive of her decision to apply to university, noting, 'I know my parents would love to help their kids and stuff, but they don't know how to'. As Anam highlights, however, this lack of practical support affected parental engagement throughout her educational history.

'Well, my dad speaks a little bit English and my mum [cannot] not really speak English, so they struggle to read anything like application forms, and then they struggle to understand and they can't even help me fill it in,

and when it came to personal statements and looking at unis, I couldn't rely on them ... When I came to [the] open day, I told my sister because my parents wouldn't understand that, and it's like been like that throughout my whole education.' (Anam, second-year student)

For all the participants, choosing a university that was close to their family was important. Contrary to the popular stereotype, the students who had lived away from home (four of the six) did not cite facing any parental or family opposition in their choice to do so.

'Although my parents are upset about it, although they're, like, we're going to miss you so much, and I'm going to miss them so much ... they said themselves that it's going to be a good experience for [me to move away].' (Shazia, prospective student)

However, one student spoke of disapproval from the wider community, with some people asking her mother, 'Why did you send your daughter out to uni?' and saying, 'You should never send your daughter out.' The taboo around girls living away from home emanated from their local communities, which put pressure on parents to refuse to let their children move out from a desire to avoid reputational damage within the wider community. Saira, a mature student with extensive experience of working professionally with the local Pakistani community, for example, commented that

'Asian parents like to keep very much control of anything that their kids are involved in, who they speak to and who they engage with, and who their friends are, even in this day and age.' (Saira, mature student)

Saira believed that this parental control was also rooted in a fear that their children might become 'too westernised' and might 'lose their faith', which could have far-ranging, long-term repercussions.

'They might go down the wrong path and do things that in Islam is forbidden, and then the impact is that that gets around in communities. People will know this is happening, and then who's going to want to marry them?' (Saira, mature student)

For Nadia, however, parental refusal to live away from home was not because due to a lack of trust in her *per se* but because

'... they don't trust the influences around me – they don't trust people. They don't trust people's intentions, and they aren't comfortable with a non-Muslim way of life ... I don't actually think it's about not trusting the child; it's actually about "I don't trust the world out there and I think they will harm you and you will get harmed."' (Nadia, graduate)

When asked about their plans after graduation, the participants were highly aspirational and were planning to pursue professional careers. However, they were also concerned that there were wider cultural expectations within the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities for women to marry and have a family soon after graduation, with husbands seen as the main breadwinners. Whilst they were keen to stress that there was nothing



wrong in cases where women had ‘actually made that personal choice: that they want to look after their children, that they want to be full-time mothers’, Nadia commented that this perceived emphasis on motherhood as ‘full-time devotion’ prevented some young mothers from taking up childcare and re-entering the labour market.

‘... because it almost seems like you’re shying away from your own responsibilities ... that you are a mother and you should take care of your child.’

For her, this was seen as a cultural glass ceiling because

‘... whereas women from other cultures may have all of those other options as to who can look after that child, maybe it’s a bit of a taboo thing for Muslim women to do the same thing.’

The problems faced by young Pakistani and Bangladeshi females seeking to combine education, career and relationships was prevalent across the interviews, with one interviewee, Sana, commenting:

‘There’s no in-between for women in our communities to say, “Look, I want to be independent; I want to do my own thing. I want to work first. I want to make ... build something up before I decide to get into the marriage thing.”’ (Sana, second-year student)

Talking about jobs and careers, Nadia went on to say:

‘Some of the girls I know didn’t go to a university further out because they wanted to stay close to home and that was what their parents wanted, so they apply the same philosophy when they’re looking for a job – they want something closer to home [...] A lot of the women that I know have tended to, when applying to jobs, look locally, and I think that can be limiting, depending on where you live and [if you’re] not always willing to commute or drive long distances.’ (Nadia, graduate)

Indeed, for Nadia, women who chose to remain living at home after graduation were seen to be limiting their chances of gaining employment as a result of wanting a ‘sense of comfort and reassurance’ and because it was

‘... within their, sort of, comfort zone. It’s an area that they know. It’s a location that they know. It’s a community that they know – people that they know.’

The women’s accounts, however, were also quite critical of the choices some of their fellow South Asian students were adopting:

‘They’re dependent. They’re reliant on their parents. Like, for example, I know people who stay at home and study, and their parents do everything for them. They cook, clean. They live in their house. They don’t have to worry about bills and things like that.’ (Sana, second-year student)

The ways in which the women responded to, and explored, stereotypes encountered by Pakistani and Bangladeshi women was intriguing.

Much of the research that has been undertaken to explore the on-campus experiences of Pakistani and Bangladeshi has largely focused on the strategies employed by young Asian women within both schools and HE establishments to challenge the popular negative stereotypes they experience there, which emanate from wider society (Brah and Minhas, 1985; Mac an Ghail, 1988; Shain, 2000; Tyrer and Ahmad, 2006). Such studies have demonstrated that, rather than remaining passive victims, British Asian young women employ a variety of strategies in order to survive and resist the racism and stereotyping they encounter (Hussain and Bagguley, 2007; Ahmad, 2001; Vincent, 2013). Within higher education, research has explored the ways in which Muslim students are negatively stereotyped by staff (Hussain and Bagguley, 2007; Bains, 2001), which then becomes institutionally inscribed as discrimination. This was the case in this study.

Across the women's accounts, however, their discourses went beyond critiquing stereotyping or their peers who conform to these stereotypes to actively positioning themselves as 'not like them', deploying defensive othering to draw boundaries between themselves and those they considered to be less successful or ambitious. This defensive othering developed across all the accounts as the participants explored their own choice-making and the academic and social strategies they employed to enable their success.

## Defensive othering

Defensive othering is an adaptive strategic response used by members of a subordinate group to deflect the implicit and explicit stigma they experience (Schwalbe et al., 2000). It occurs when those being positioned as subordinate accept 'the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then [say] in effect "There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me"' (Schwalbe et al., 2000: 425). As a result, defensive othering is:

'... identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group.' (Schwalbe et al., 2000: 425)

In describing young Pakistani and Bangladeshi female graduates, Sana, for example, commented that:

'Most of these [Pakistani and Bangladeshi] girls are at university and they come out of it, and then they just get a normal job and then they get married. That's the situation.' (Sana, first-year student)

Meanwhile, Nadia, in describing 'other' women from her community, explained that:

‘I really do think that young Asian women ... I just feel like they do lack career ambition. I really do.’ (Nadia, graduate)

Of course, for many of the participants, women marrying young and working in low-income jobs is a reality in their communities. As Anam comments:

‘Everyone in my family in my area get married really young and, I know, I know it’s making me sound like, what the hell, but it’s like the norm in the area – girls don’t do jobs. My family is one of the few families where girls are doing jobs. [Other Pakistani women] do jobs, but it’s not well paid ... It’s not jobs in the tech sector or business or English; it’s retail jobs. And I do feel like I’m different.’ (Anam, second-year student)

However, the stereotyping of all female South Asians as marrying young was a source of frustration to the women who sought to resist such stereotypes:

‘Even sometimes my friends make jokes like, “You’re going to get off and get married” and stuff like that, and I’m like, no I’m not. They’re, like, my white friends, but that’s how the media portrays it and that’s how it is in their head.’ (Anam, second-year student)

However, as Pyke (2010: 558) notes, ‘the resistance of racist stereotypes through distancing can pivot on the simultaneous assimilation of White supremacy and the glorification of Whiteness’. Across the interviews, whiteness was viewed – both explicitly and latently – as being intrinsically linked with success by both the participants and their peers, highlighting the way in which ‘internalized oppression manifests not simply at the level of the individual psyche but also in *collective* social practices’ (Pyke, 2010: 558 (original emphasis)). As Anam noted:

‘My friends always say I’m like a coconut because I’m brown on the outside but white on the inside. I do feel like the same because I’m sort of, like, I feel like I have different aspirations and I see myself better than – that sounds horrible – better than, like, what is expected of me.’ (Anam, second-year student)

The lack of social mobility that young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women experience was thus positioned as a choice; in other words, ‘other’ women choose to conform to, and therefore confirm, prevailing negative stereotypes of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women as passive, unambitious and lacking any strong sense of agency and independence. As Sana commented:

‘It’s like they don’t want to move forward, to progress, to make something of themselves, to build themselves, to be a better woman, to become better people and things like that. Or to do something. That’s where my issue lies.’ (Sana, first-year student)

In making these assertions, however, the women also risked normalising the stereotypes about their own communities. Also, in order to differentiate themselves from those Pakistani and Bangladeshi women they deemed to be

unsuccessful, lacking or conforming to normalised stereotypes, they also, to some extent, all adopted a position of defensive othering. In doing so, they simultaneously reinforced these same stereotypes whilst adopting the position of 'other'. For example:

'I do actually consider myself to be, like, a rare breed. Not because I'm anything special [laughs] but ... personally speaking, if I reflect on the people that I've met and my own circle of friends, I really feel like that ambition to progress in a suitable career and do really well is lacking ... I feel like I'm well connected within my own community and have quite a wide circle of friends to just make that assessment. I don't think it's stereotypical.' (Nadia, graduate)

By positioning themselves in opposition to Pakistani and Bangladeshi women that they deemed to be unsuccessful, the participants were creating a simplified binary whereby they saw themselves as being successful because they were agentic, ambitious and independent individuals, whilst it was the innate lack of these attributes that made other Pakistani and Bangladeshi women unsuccessful. Thus, adopting a position of defensive othering allowed them to create their own narratives and assert their individual identity whilst deflecting the stigma and negative stereotyping they face.

'I don't think there is any discrimination at all these days. OK, well maybe there's some, but I don't think there is in my case anyway [or] barriers. Maybe if [other Pakistani and Bangladeshi women feel their] job is too far away, they might not want to do it.' (Anam, second-year student)

By placing the blame and onus on the 'other' for failing to move up socially, however, the participants were promoting the idea of meritocracy, which detracts from the wider, institutional structures and challenges of racism, discrimination and poverty that threaten the social mobility of British Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. The employment of defensive othering, therefore, not only had the potential to reproduce negative stereotypes but, ultimately, ran the risk of acting as a reproduction of inequality (Schwalbe et al., 2000: 425). As Pyke and Dang (2003) note in their discussion of defensive othering:

'A major concern is that because internalized racism reveals dynamics by which oppression is reproduced, it will lead to blaming the victims and move attention away from the racist institutions and practices that privilege whites at the expense of people of color. Internalized racism also causes discomfort because it suggests that the effects of racism are deeper and broader than many would like to admit.' (Pyke and Dang, 2003: 151)

## Defensive othering and identity

The concept of defensive othering is a useful heuristic through which to explore how, and why, those positioned as deficit or as 'other' respond to processes of marginalisation and stereotyping, as well as the implications this form of strategising has on Pakistani and Bangladeshi identities. In particular, recognising and understanding defensive othering can help to highlight the difficulty Pakistani and Bangladeshi female students have in positioning themselves in relation to the wider negative social discourse surrounding them. By defining themselves in opposition to 'your typical Asian' (to quote one of the study's participants), the women were creating alternative representations of Pakistani female identity for themselves while simultaneously reinforcing commonly held negative perceptions about this group.

In addition, as they were all the first in their generation to enter higher education and the workplace, the women occupied a liminal space: on one hand, looking forward to a future (of higher level skills and employment) that hadn't been navigated by anyone within their families, and yet, on the other hand, also looking back to their roots and the local communities they had grown up in and to which they still retained strong links. The defensive othering amongst the women in this study is therefore significant because it reveals how painfully lonely and isolating it can be to move socially or culturally away from families or communities, as the following quote makes clear:

'I just don't know who to talk about [it] with. It's something that always plays with me because I feel I'm in ... that role where, yeah, all of these Asian people I see but I don't really click with them. I don't click with the girls mostly. It's not like I'm trying to be, oh, I'm trying to just do my own thing and whatever and not follow rules and regulations, and I'm trying to be a rebel, but it's just ... I feel like ... I feel different; I think differently.' (Sana, first-year student)

## Reflections

Although this research project initially set out to explore and better understand the barriers perceived by Pakistani and Bangladeshi women to entering and succeeding within higher education and the labour market, through the unexpected finding of defensive othering it has highlighted that the effect on those who achieve, or seek to achieve, social mobility from these communities is a highly complex and affective experience.

As noted earlier, the interviews were undertaken by a British-Pakistani female researcher. Over the course of the project, a number of uncomfortable conversations with WP practitioners and teachers took place in which they were quick to stereotype Pakistani and Bangladeshi women negatively as 'oppressed' by cultural and religious practices. Furthermore,

by labelling the researcher a ‘poster girl’ for the project and asking her to think carefully about ‘the kind of Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls’ used to promote the project, it was implied that there was a right or wrong way to be a South Asian woman.

This outdated stereotyping stems from and is situated within the wider and unrelentingly social discourse of Muslim women as passive, marginalised and oppressed. As Mirza and Meeto (2018) note, however, within educational environments, this popular public and political construction of Muslim women as ‘pathological victims’ of their culture (p. 237) often leads to girls from these communities being seen as the ‘oppressed other’ in need of ‘saving’ (pp. 228–229) and shapes the pastoral interventions targeted at these groups. Within higher education, local, evidence-based outreach interventions that draw upon the actual experiences of these students and their communities, rather than resorting to building upon entrenched stereotypes, are therefore key to challenging such assumptions.

Furthermore, this negative framing of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women also has very real implications for the everyday experiences of students as it often translates into racist stereotyping on campus. Moreover, the positioning of Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls as either ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful’ is deeply problematic for individuals, not just because it pushes young Asian women in to adopting a position of defensive othering but also because, through their and their peers’ associations – both latent and explicit – of whiteness with success, it allows for the internalisation and reproduction of a racist hierarchy created by the dominant group to be sustained.

Although delving deep into the causes and consequences of defensive othering is uncomfortable, it is imperative that the ways in which young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women adopt defensive positions, or are positioned by their peers or by widening-participation practitioners, are challenged through anti-racist and racial-awareness training, as any failure to do so will allow both negative stereotypes and feelings of internalised oppression to be perpetuated.

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<sup>i</sup> There is of course evidence of a gender penalty across many ethnic groups (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017)

<sup>ii</sup> A short report covering some of the themes of this paper was produced at the end of the study. This paper builds on this work.

<sup>iii</sup> [Study Higher](#) is a National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) comprising the Universities of Oxford, Oxford Brookes, Reading and Buckinghamshire New University as well as a number of further-education colleges.

<sup>iv</sup> All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

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