Higher Educational Attainment and Lower Labor Participation among Bangladeshi Migrant Muslim Women in Australia: Disparity and Internal Barriers

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Abstract: The 2021 census data in Australia show that a higher proportion of Bangladeshi Muslim women in Australia have postgraduate degrees compared to the broader female population. They are also more likely to have a bachelor’s degree when compared to their counterparts in the wider female cohort. However, the unemployment rate for Bangladeshi Muslim women is more than twice as high as that of the general female population. While a comparison between higher educational attainment and lower labour participation raises the question of whether the goal of higher education is indeed labour participation and the dilemma of valuing education solely based on its economic returns, nonetheless, the disparity alarms curiosity to investigate the reasons. The existing research on Muslim women in Australia reveal a complex web of external and internal multilayered intersecting factors that influence migrant women’s labour participation and makes them more susceptible to financial vulnerabilities. Utilizing qualitative methods in analysing fieldwork data from ongoing PhD research, this paper underscores the critical need for a nuanced understanding of internal cultural, domestic, and religious factors to address the unique challenges faced by this demographic in their labour market participation in Australia.

Keywords: Bangladeshi women; Muslim; gender; Islam; Australia; migration; religion; culture; labour participation; financial vulnerabilities

1. Introduction: Disparity

The 2021 Australian census data reveal that 19.71% of Bangladeshi Muslim women in Australia hold a postgraduate degree, compared to 7.95% of the general female population. Additionally, 22.75% have a bachelor’s degree, compared to 15.87% of women across Australia (ABS 2023). This illustrates that Bangladeshi Muslim women in Australia have an 11.76% higher rate of holding postgraduate degrees and a 6.88% higher rate of holding bachelor’s degrees compared to Australian women in general. The same census data show, in comparison to the total Australian female population, the unemployment rate is 5.31% amongst Bangladeshi Muslim women compared to 2.21% in the wider female population. This demonstrates that the unemployment rate for Bangladeshi Muslim women in Australia is 3.10% higher than that for Australian women in general. This finding is similar to a 2015 report produced by the University of South Australia on the demographic of Australian Muslims which also confirms that Australian Muslims generally have a higher level of education compared to the overall population (Hassan 2015). They are more likely to finish high school and often have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Despite this, Australian Muslims have lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates than the general Australian population. A subsequent 2018 report (Hassan 2018) mentions that one-third of Muslims in 2016 were not in the labour force, which is more than just over one-quarter of all Australians. For those Muslims who were in the labour force, the employment rate for Muslims was 32.5%, compared with 45.7% for all Australians. The unemployment rate for Muslims in the labour force was 5.7%, nearly twice as high as the rate for all Australians.
However, it is crucial to recognize that higher labour participation of a particular group of people does not necessarily equate to their higher financial autonomy or economic empowerment. Trying to have a sense of migrant women’s economic empowerment by looking at the rate of their labour market participation would rather posit critical questions: Is labour participation the end-product of education? Can the value of education be assessed purely on economic outcome? This creates a unique dilemma of a ‘capitalocentric’ society (Gibson-Graham 2006) for South Asian migrant women in Australia (Syed et al. 2020); a dilemma arises from the obsession with output production and linking financial autonomy with financial income. Notably, the higher unemployment rate and lower labour participation among Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women are not exclusive to Australia. Research on Bangladeshi migrant women in the UK (Dale et al. 2002), USA (Baluja 2003), Italy (Mannan 2003), and Canada (Halder 2012) also reported similar trends of lower labour participation and higher unemployment rates among this specific demographic. Such a widespread trend warrants a thorough examination to identify the external and internal barriers that might impede the labour participation of Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women globally. Considering these observations and the paradox of higher educational attainment and lower labour market participation among Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia, this paper, focusing on the internal barriers, underscores the critical need for a nuanced understanding of religious, cultural, and domestic factors to address the unique challenges faced by this demographic in their labour market participation in Australia. The central question that this paper asks is the following: How do internal barriers such as religious, cultural, and domestic factors contribute to the discrepancy between higher educational attainment and lower labour market participation among Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia?

2. Disparity and Discrimination: The Australian Context

With over one-quarter of the Australian population consisting of international migrants (ABS 2023), previous research (Hassan 2015) confirms that, regardless the educational attainment, Muslims and migrants tend to earn lower weekly incomes in Australia. This income gap is even wider among Muslim migrants, possibly due to prejudice against Muslims and systematic discrimination targeting them. It is usually perceived that all Australians applying for a job have equal chances of being employed irrespective of their ethnicity. When two candidates share identical resumes, their chances of securing a job interview should be equally matched. This perspective is rooted in the Australian ethos of providing everyone with a fair opportunity. Unfortunately, research conducted in Australia on discrimination against ethnic minorities in the labour market (Booth et al. 2012) challenges this notion and proves that Australians with Middle Eastern/Muslim backgrounds are 14% less likely to be employed than those with Australian backgrounds, compared to about 12% for Chinese and 10% for Indigenous names. In this discriminatory labour climate, it is no wonder that migrant women in Australia face unique challenges regarding labour participation. Their labour market experiences are different from those of white Australian women (Misztal 1991), and they have lower rates of employment compared to Australian-born women (Sloan 2012). In comparison to their male counterparts, migrant women’s challenges in the labour market are much more complex (Syed and Pio 2010). Migrant and refugee women are seven per cent less likely to be employed than those born in Australia (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2016).

This confirms the finding that Muslim women in general (Imtoual 2006) and migrant Muslim women in particular (Shafiq 2016), who maintain religious and cultural exclusiveness by bearing visible religious markers on clothing (Nilan et al. 2012), face more obstacles to inclusion in Australia’s social and economic activities. What makes migrant Muslim women’s struggles in the West, particularly in Australia, different from the other migrant women groups is Islamophobia (Ho 2007; Syed and Pio 2010) and discrimination against Muslims (Williams et al. 2019). This discourse of Western Islamophobia has greatly disadvantaged Muslims in general (Kamenou and Fearfull 2006) and Muslim women in
particular (Syed and Pio 2010) in their labour market participation. Cook (2011) also argued that Muslims in Australia are less likely to engage with the labour force partly because they face unique discrimination based on their religion. Hebbani (2014) also well documented how Islamophobia negatively impacts Muslim migrant and refugee women’s labour market participation in Australia. Any study on Muslim women’s labour participation in Australia and the West must consider Islamophobia as an intersecting factor that plays out in the context of Western historical essentialism of Islam as ‘oppressive to women’ (Keddie 2019).

However, Bangladeshi Muslim women’s labour market participation in Australia cannot be fully understood through the lens of external factors alone, such as Islamophobia, discrimination, and racism. It is also similarly important to consider the complex interplay between internal religious and cultural factors, which can hinder or facilitate women’s economic engagement. Intersectionality in this regard, as a theoretical framework, acknowledges the multifaceted nature of social identities and the ways in which various factors—both internal and external—interact to shape unique experiences and vulnerabilities. In this paper, the focus is narrowed to internal religious and cultural factors and how these internal dynamics significantly influence women’s participation in the labour market. By emphasizing the importance of these internal factors, this article aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the barriers that Bangladeshi Muslim women encounter in their labour market participation.

The findings in this paper set the stage for further exploring the complex internal challenges that contribute to this disparity, particularly in their intersections with culture, domesticity, and religion. In doing so, the documentation of abusive behaviours of some participants’ husbands is not intended to generalize all Muslim men but to highlight specific cases within this study’s context. The narratives of participants experiencing family and financial abuse are used to illustrate the broader issue of internal barriers rather than to stereotype a community. These experiences are neither universal nor reflect the behaviour of all individuals in the community.

3. Methodology

The data presented in this study are derived from fieldwork completed by the researcher as part of her ongoing PhD investigation into the influence of religious narratives and perceptions in spousal financial abuse among Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia. All participants were first-generation migrant Australian citizens at the time of their participation. Participants’ ages ranged from twenty-eight to forty-three years. All of them arrived in Australia between 2001 and 2020. Unless specified otherwise, the data referenced herein are sourced from this doctoral research. The fieldwork spanned from February to May 2023 and was carried out by the researcher directly. The study participants comprised Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women residing in New South Wales, Australia. It is crucial to recognize that the findings of this study are not generalizable to all Muslim women in Australia, as the sample is restricted to a specific community within New South Wales. The recruitment of participants was conducted using a snowball sampling method, which may introduce selection bias, as the sample relies on the networks of initial participants. This study involved 29 participants, a relatively small sample size that further limits the generalizability of the results. Thematic Analysis (TA) was employed to interpret the collected data. To protect the privacy of the individuals involved, pseudonyms have been used throughout this research in place of actual names. The limitations of this study include its potential biases inherent in snowball sampling, the limited timeframe of the fieldwork, and the narrow geographic and demographic scope of the sample. Additionally, as this research concentrates on a particular subgroup of the Muslim population in Australia, the conclusions drawn may not reflect the experiences of other Muslim communities or those in different regions.
4. Disparity Does Not Define the Challenges

This research unpacked a similar pattern of disparity between higher educational attainment and lower labour participation among the participants who are Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia. The educational profile of the participants in this research demonstrates that a significant 31.03 per cent hold a bachelor’s degree, and an even more substantial 55.17 per cent possess postgraduate qualifications. Despite such high levels of education, their engagement in the labour market is significantly lower, with only 37.93 per cent employed full-time, 10.34 per cent part-time, and another 10.34 per cent in casual jobs, leaving a substantial portion of these highly qualified women unemployed. This disparity between higher educational attainment and lower labour participation underscores the multifaceted challenges that the demographic may confront in Australia.

It is however important to note that even for those participants who are employed, being in the labour market and earning an income does not necessarily equate to economic empowerment or financial autonomy for many of them. Roji, a participant in this research, mentioned that for the initial five years of her job, she had no control or even any say on her income. Her husband kept asking her to work more. She was already working all the weekdays and one weekend. Her husband started contacting her employers to allocate her night shifts so that she gets extra after-hours working payment. But even with overworking and extra work, she was always left with only forty or fifty dollars in her account at the end of the week. Roji said, “...he behaved as if the money I was earning automatically belonged to him”. Roji’s experience highlights that for migrant women, labour participation alone is insufficient to achieve financial autonomy. Despite her extensive work hours and overworking, she had no control over her income, and her husband exerted a strong influence over how she earned and spent her money. This brings in a different dynamic into the discussion, that many working migrant women may not have expected financial autonomy as their earnings are often controlled or managed by other family members.

Kobita, another participant in this research, was working three jobs simultaneously. There was a full-time shift on the weekday morning, another part-time job was three days a week in the afternoon, and the third job was a full day over the weekend. Since day one of her arrival in Australia, her husband told her that he was in enormous debt following the expenses related to their wedding and her migration-related expenditure. Her husband used his networks to get her all three jobs which involved manual labour: industrial cleaning, food packaging, and working as a helping hand in a restaurant kitchen. “I never in my life ever had worked so much, continuously, day after day”, said Kobita. She did not even know the amount she was earning since she had no access to her bank account. Her husband always managed her account. She neither had any cash in her hand. Her husband took her to the grocery and let her shop once a fortnight to buy the necessary things. She was sobbing and crying while she was describing how tough the situation was for her, “...that day I was sick. My knees were hurting. The day before I had a long shift in both jobs. And I also had to cook at home because he wanted fresh food every day. I told him I was feeling like I’d faint. He asked me to have Panadol, which I did. I asked him if I could call in sick at work for the next day. Suddenly his mood was completely changed. From caring and concerned, he became very agitated and annoyed. He said I shouldn’t call in sick for such a small reason. He said if I call in sick, I’ll not be paid for the day. He said he won’t be able to keep up paying back the debt if I don’t help him with earning...I felt very intimidated. I then said I am sorry for wanting to call in sick...”.

Roji and Kobita’s experiences illustrate that the disparity between higher educational attainment and lower labour market participation does not capture the full picture of the challenges faced by Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia. Even for those who are employed, many lack basic financial autonomy due to significant control and exploitation by family members, often driven by deep-seated cultural and religious norms. Understanding these internal barriers is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by these women in Australia’s labour market and to highlight that the disparity between
educational attainment and lower labour market participation is just one aspect of a more complex and systemic issue that requires a nuanced approach to fully understand and effectively address.

5. Disparity and the Internal Barriers

While international migration may bring along more opportunities for social and economic mobility, it can also intensify existing gender inequality and economic injustices, introducing new forms of exploitation and abuse (Yamanaka and Piper 2005). Women’s migration is predominantly driven by family associations (Thapan 2005), a trend that is consistent in Australia, where many professionally qualified women migrate as partners of migrant men (Rajendran et al. 2019). Typically, women have little control and influence on migration decisions, with such decisions frequently being tied to the job opportunities available to men (Jollie and Reeves 2005). Bangladeshi women are no exception. The migration of Bangladeshi women to developed countries is largely seen as associational or tied, in which women follow their male partners (Siddiqui 2003). Shafiq (2016) also has a similar observation about the Bangladeshi female participants in her study in Melbourne, Australia. In most cases, Bangladeshi women migrate to Australia only because their husbands decided so based on the husbands’ career prospects. This dependent status in migration can create an inherent power imbalance within spousal relationships and may affect the labour participation status of many Bangladeshi women. Consistent with the available data in the existing literature as mentioned above, 93% of the participants in this study migrated to Australia on a dependent visa. In such cases, women who were employed before migration had to sacrifice their careers and follow their husbands to keep the whole family together. Ruma, a participant in this study, detailed how she was earning more than her husband during their marriage but had to quit her job and follow him to Australia. Moreover, Shafiq (2016) observed that a sense of despair grows among those women whose educational qualifications potentially do not lead to success in the workplace, and consequently, many of them decide to remain unemployed following the sense of waste and disenchantment. This phenomenon is evident in this study as well. Afrina, who was a university senior lecturer back home, quit her job after marriage to migrate to Australia. She spent several years trying to find employment relevant to her expertise but eventually gave up hope. After the birth of her children, she was never able to return to her profession-related job, despite a strong desire to do so.

The other intersecting factors that previous studies identified as significantly contributing to the labour market disadvantage of migrants in Australia is the lack of English language skills (Teicher et al. 2002). Poor English language proficiency further marginalizes migrant women in the Australian labour market (Cook 2011) as migrant women often lag behind men in terms of their skills in English. While 80% of male respondents reported speaking English very well, only 49% of females reported doing so in the study conducted by Shafiq (2016) among Bangladeshi migrants in Australia. Building language skills in men is often prioritized over women in many migrant families where men are viewed as breadwinners, and as a result, women are at a disadvantage when their language skills are perceived as less important (Vaughan et al. 2015). When Nabila, a participant in this study, wanted to attend free English language classes, her husband dismissed the idea, saying, “They teach baby English, you’ve already completed a Master’s in Bangladesh. These classes will teach you nothing”. Nabila regretted not attending the classes offered to dependent spouses, but she did not want to anger her husband by going against his decision. Similarly, Nodi regretted listening to her husband and not taking the free English course in time. In some cases, even if the husband’s discouragement is not deliberate, it still makes it much harder for the wife to build relationships, establish personal networks, and increase opportunities for labour market participation.

Male bread-earner status and patriarchal family structure (Fisher 2013), traditional gender roles (Muchoki 2012), discrimination and common settlement barriers (Cortis and Bullen 2016), loss of family support, navigating cultural norms, seeking appropriate em-
ployment, and managing household responsibilities (Syed et al. 2020) were also identified in previous research for being responsible factors in migrant women’s lower labour participation in Australia. In the discussion of internal intersecting factors, this paper, based on the lived experiences of the participants in this research, contends that the labour participation of Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia is primarily influenced by three interrelated factors: the influence of religious views on women’s labour participation, the excessive burden of domestic duties in addition to motherhood, and the cultural norm of male financial dominance.

5.1. The Influence of Religious Views on Women’s Labour Participation

In Australia, Muslim women in general share the common trend of the lowest labour participation. ABS 2016 census data reveal that the workforce participation rate for working-age Muslim women is 42%, the lowest compared to women claiming other religious affiliations, followed by Buddhist women (65%), well below the national female working-age participation rate of 72% (Dash 2018). This notably lower labour participation of Muslim females in Australia, compared to women from other religious backgrounds, naturally arouses curiosity. One wonders whether there are prevailing religious narratives and perceptions within this specific group that reinforce certain gender roles and ideologies, thereby affecting these women’s labour participation. Peach (2006) argued that culture by itself is not a sufficient explanation for migrant Muslim women’s exceptionally low participation in the formal labour market; rather, the influence of religion must be taken into consideration. When Safia, a participant in this research, refused her salary to be deposited into her husband’s account, her husband demanded she be an obedient wife, to obey his demand, as ‘instructed’ in Islam. Safia refused to do so on the basis that her husband had not paid her mahr (the wedding gift a Muslim groom must gift to his bride) yet, so he was himself not following Islam properly. Yet, family friends and community members rebuked Safia for being ‘disobedient’ to her husband and a ‘sinner’. Safia eventually had to choose either to continue the job with her salary going into her husband’s account or to quit the job. She chose to quit. The way Safia’s attempt to work outside the home was challenged based on perceived religious directives by her husband and the community is indicative of how religious narratives and perceptions can further complicate migrant Muslim women’s labour participation.

It is nothing new that religious perceptions—with interpretation based on the specific cultural context—are often mobilized against women. The connection between women and religion is too great for anyone to avoid (Lamrabet 1995). Religion is so critically and intricately interwoven with Muslim women’s issues that any attempt to understand them without looking into the dominant religious narratives and perceptions is almost certain to fail (Mahbuba 2013). The influence of religious narratives is particularly relevant to migrant Muslim women in Australia since research confirmed that a large majority of them perceive their citizenship through a primary focus on the family unit based on their religious perceptions of gendered roles (Yasmeen 2007). These gendered roles, though can vary in their meaning depending on the socio-cultural background of the individual, are mostly fixated on women performing nurturer roles in the family, whereas men provide for the family. Given that a range of Muslim religious narratives and perceptions from classical to modern times reinforce the concept of men as the family breadwinner and women’s subordination in exchange (WLUM 2003), a husband’s permission is considered a religious prerequisite for a wife’s financial decisions, arrangements, or any form of mobility.

A 2012 study conducted in Sydney among practising Muslim women identified the requirement of husbands’ permission to work as one of the decisive factors in Muslim women’s workforce participation (Ihram 2013). The same study asserted that Imams in Australia generally suggest Muslim women should get their husbands’ permission to work. The study also notes that cultural interpretations of Islam by traditional religious and family figures affect Muslim women’s work opportunities and even raise doubt about whether women ‘have’ the ability to undertake paid employment (Ihram 2013).
by Samani (2013) on Western Australian Muslim women also affirmed that religious beliefs in the community often restrict Muslim women’s access and opportunity to employment. This religious positionality of a wife legitimizes a husband preventing her from labour market participation. Ayesha, a participant in this study, was strictly forbidden by her husband from attempting to obtain a job. Despite perfectly managing household chores, caring for the children, and preparing fresh home-cooked meals every day, her husband and the male community leaders told her that she was not allowed to work outside unless her husband permitted it.

The subscription of these gender roles, reinforcing marriage and motherhood as defining factors for women’s identity, is overwhelmingly present and dominates religious narratives of gender within Muslim communities, home and abroad. In researching young Arab Muslim Canadian women, Hamdan (2007) asserted that the prevailing subscription within the Muslim community about the purpose of women’s education is to produce good mothers and wives. Mansoor (2009), in her research on Muslim women in Johannesburg, encountered a similar notion among her participants who believed that women are primarily meant to fulfill the role of caretaker in the home due to their nurturing characteristics. In Australia, McCue (2008) mentioned Muslim mothers who expressed a preference for other Muslim women to consider childminding as a priority and to choose it over employment. While the role mothers play is essential and most valuable, it can also become a form of oppression when women are expected to provide care without adequate support or recognition, often at the expense of every other aspect of their lives. When Nodi, a participant in this study, tried to return to work, she faced backlash from her family and the community for being ‘selfish’ and a ‘bad mother’ who neglects her children. Studies found that many non-Muslim Australian women also hold strong views about women not working when they have young children (Nilan et al. 2012); however, religious influence on reinforcing traditional gender roles within Australian Muslim communities cannot be overlooked.

In studying Bangladeshis in Bangladesh and their immigrant counterparts in Queens, USA, Baluja (2003) observed that religious affiliation and the patriarchal culture have strongly influenced the gender ideologies of the Bangladeshi people at home and abroad. A similar observation has been made by Dale et al. (2002) about the Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrant Muslim women in Oldham, the UK, asserting that the traditional expectations of women to remain at home were portrayed as part of the Islamic faith, and there was, generally, an acceptance that a woman should not work outside the home, and this was often justified with Islam. Kabeer (2000) argued that there is a strong religious influence in institutionalizing male power within the Bangladeshi migrant community that restricts Bangladeshi migrant women in London from engaging in employment outside their homes. Religion, like other intersecting factors in the lives of the Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia, is utilized as a tool for exerting control over women’s choices, especially regarding their participation in the workforce.

5.2. The Excessive Burden of Domestic Duties in Addition to Motherhood

“It was very difficult for me to manage time to look for a job. I was the one who was taking care of the kids. Dropping them at school, picking them up after school... He (the husband) never helped me in the house (chores). He never even washed his plate after a meal, just left the plate on the table. I had to wash it... He would demand freshly cooked food every day. Otherwise, he would sulk his face and would talk in a way that made me feel like I was a very bad wife who wasn’t taking care of his basic needs...”, said Hosna. Hosna also talked about her mother who always had a career and how Hosna’s own struggle is different than that of her mother. Her mother had help in maintaining both her career and family. ‘We always had housemaid’, said Hosna. Often, in migrant women’s home countries—as observed in the lives of the participants in this research—local housemaids, relatives, or other female family members help a wife in taking care of the children and other household chores, which allows a working wife and mother to continue
her career. However, this support and help is disrupted completely when they migrate (Kou et al. 2017). Even though support ceases to exist, the expectation never dies. Women like Hosna who come from South Asian backgrounds, particularly from Bangladesh, are fully expected to take on most, if not all, of the household responsibilities without much input from their partners. This significantly hinders their employment opportunities (Sharma 2016). Cooking and household responsibilities are fundamental parts of being a good mother and a good wife for South Asian women (Bhandari and Titzmann 2017), and as a result, they often spend a considerable number of hours fulfilling caring responsibilities, cleaning, and preparing fresh meals even after migration (Syed et al. 2020).

Bonni, another participant in this study like Hosna, also described how she had to quit studying after two semesters. Bonni was hoping to get a job after completing her studies. Bonni said, “It was impossible to continue studying. There were guests almost every other day. I would take my children to the childcare, go to TAFE, get the children on my way back home, and after coming home, he (the husband) would tell me guests were coming for dinner! I’d have to cook. How does one continue to study in that environment? I quit my studies. I was exhausted both mentally and physically…” Like Bonni, 31 per cent of participants in this research had to quit either their studies or employment at one point in their migrant lives following the excessive burden of domestic duties in addition to motherhood. Studies in the Bangladeshi migrant community in the UK found that migration often exacerbates Bangladeshi migrant women’s domestic workloads, creating a barrier to their cultural adaptation and professional integration (Salway 2007). Domestic responsibility coupled with their reproductive role, especially in the absence of a support network, plays a critical role in their lower labour participation (Kabeer 2000). In many cases, these women have to take care of all domestic chores and childrearing, alongside any full-time or part-time employment they may undertake. This burden is compounded by the reluctance of Bangladeshi migrant Muslim men to share these tasks due to prevailing perceptions of masculinity that dissuade them from engaging in household duties and childcare (Baluja 2003).

A migrant Muslim female participant in the research conducted by Syed and Pio (2010, p. 129) in Sydney described her exhausting juggling between domestic responsibilities, motherhood, and profession. She said, “Job is only for 5 hours so it doesn’t affect much because when the children are at school I go to work and I will come back home and children are at home so my responsibilities are the same… but I get stressed and tired and the kids don’t pick up their things and make a mess… we have been fighting with each other [laughs] and mummy is cross with everyone [laughs] and husband is complaining”. Although balancing work and domestic responsibilities is recognized as a source of stress and difficulty for all Australians (Baird and Pocock 2003), on top of the heavily gendered division of work at home, migrant women also face the central challenge of raising their children in a new culture and keeping their own cultural identities alive (Karim-Tessem 2008) and bear the brunt of adapting to the host country (Ressia et al. 2017). It is thereby no surprise that many migrant women often compromise their careers to take more traditional gender roles as wives and mothers after immigration (Ressia et al. 2017). Brah (1994), in her research on the dynamics of race and gender in South Asian women’s employment, found that the great majority of women emphasized that it was important for them to undertake paid work; however, all the women in this category—both married and single—cited housework and other caring responsibilities as taking up most of their time.

According to a report by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2017), many migrant women in Australia encounter traditional cultural expectations of women as domestic caregivers and have to bear the primary childcare responsibilities that inhibit their overall employment opportunities. Some Australian Muslim women have expressed experiencing pressure from family members to remain at home rather than participate in the labour market (DIAC 2008). Working migrant women face a double workload at home and work, leading many of them to give up their careers or switch to a part-time or more flexible occupation despite high educational qualifications and a good command
of the host country’s language (Meares 2010). Skilled South Asian migrant women often end up negotiating work and family life by seeking low-prospect employment (Syed et al. 2020). This is not surprising in the wider Australian context as 2021 census data reveal that 27 per cent of female workers in Australia performed 15 h or more a week of unpaid domestic work, compared to only 10.4 per cent of male workers (ABS 2022). Bangladeshi Muslim migrant women in Australia who are employed navigate the pressures of both professional and domestic realms and bear a compounded workload that often makes employment impractical. The excessive burden of domestic duties, in addition to the responsibilities of motherhood, significantly hinders their ability to participate in the labour market, and many opt out of the workforce (Shafiq 2016). For participants in this study who tried to earn an income or pursue further studies, almost all reported having to complete all household chores before attending classes or going to work. When Safia started working, she experienced a similar struggle and frequently considered quitting. She said, “it was difficult. To manage the children, do all the house chores, and go to work. I had to rush back before the children’s school closed. I had to manage. Sometimes I felt like collapsing”.

5.3. The Cultural Norm of Male Financial Dominance

“. . .you know I also think, this is the way men are taught in our families, they are taught to be controlling. Otherwise, they are made fun of in community gatherings, by other men, and even by other women. My husband was made fun of because he is supportive (in domestic chores) . . . Our community instils in men the idea that a “real husband” must exert control over his wife, particularly on financial matters. Which poses a challenge for men who wish to be supportive and caring partners to their spouse. . .” said Urmi. Urmi’s observation reflects a similar tone raised by most participants in this research who stressed that their husbands resorted to abuse when their perceptions of authority and the traditional status quo were questioned or challenged in any way, particularly, when a wife seeks even a modest degree of financial independence and thus threatens the husband’s sense of his role as the primary breadwinner. For instance, when Hosna’s husband discovered she had saved around $300 from spare change, he intensified his scrutiny over her daily spending. Hosna recounted that her in-laws told her husband, in her presence, that if a wife “gets a smell of money”, she will no longer “like her husband’s smell”. This implies that, to maintain control over his wife, a husband should ensure that she does not have direct access to money. This culture of male dominance—often manifested through controlling female family members’ financial and other mobilities—within the Bangladeshi migrant community cannot be sidelined in the discussion of the disparity between higher education and the lower labour participation of Bangladeshi migrant women.

Immigrant or not, culture and tradition greatly impact the participation of women in the labour market (Nilan et al. 2012). For migrant women, the culture of gender regimes from their places of origin keep influencing their lives abroad (Boyd 1991). Migrant women, as opposed to migrant men, must navigate gender barriers that subordinate them according to the patriarchal standards and beliefs present in both their own immigrant communities and the wider mainstream society (Abraham 2000). In investigating Bangladeshi and Pakistani women’s engagement with the labour market in Oldham, UK, the study of Dale et al. (2002) has also uncovered a similar pattern of lower economic activity and higher unemployment rates among Bangladeshi women and asserted that women’s employment choices are influenced by cultural expectations and family and community pressures. In the context of Australia, cultural norms within the migrant communities exert a major influence on migrant women’s labour market participation (Cook 2011). Research conducted by Singh and Sidhu (2020) has elaborately explained the cultural promotion of male control of money in South Asian families, particularly in Indian families and the way a large amount of migrant Indian women’s financial experience and status in Australia is shaped by their husbands’ decisions and interests. This experience is similar to that of many participants in this research. The breadwinner ideology, i.e., men are the providers, designates money as masculine and predominantly men’s resource to control, manage, and disburse. When
Bokul was pleading for some regular pocket money, her husband became very annoyed, and “... (he) told me that I need to give him good reasons why I need any things or money. If he is satisfied, only then he will give the money”.

Migrant women in Australia, particularly from South Asian backgrounds, are often dependent on their spouses’ approval for their career choices (Syed et al. 2020). Whilst researching CALD and migrant women from Indonesia, Vietnam, Pakistan, India, Armenia, Turkey, Egypt, and Ethiopia who are living in Australia, Busbridge and Barlett (2019) mentioned stories of women like Tanya, who was working as a doctor in her home country before marriage, but her husband prohibited her from attempting to resume her career in Australia despite promising otherwise before marriage. Another woman in that study, Shreya, had gone through the opposite experience. After marriage and migration to Australia, she realised her husband married her only because of her higher educational level, which was supposed to secure her a high-paying job. She went through traumatising emotional and physical abuse as she could not obtain a high-paying job for a long time. Directly forcing wives to quit an active career or not to pursue a career, restricting wives from gaining skills or education that might be an enabler of employment, and coercive control of income and money by the men in the family are not uncommon in South Asian families in Australia (Singh and Sidhu 2020). This is also observed in this research. A participant in this study, Mala, said that her husband always aggressively reacted to her attempts to look for employment. In Mala’s words, “Every time I wanted to do a job or go outside, things immediately turned very tense. ... Each time he would keep ranting threats. And each time I got so scared, I just surrendered and got quiet. ... One day, I was trying to prepare a resume to apply for jobs. When he saw me trying to make a CV on his laptop, he snatched away the laptop and deleted the file. He strictly forbade me to touch his laptop. He kept saying that all I needed to do was take care of the children and take care of the domestic chores. That’s my responsibility. He won’t allow me to work outside”.

Previous studies have identified various gender-specific cultural barriers inside the Bangladeshi migrant community impeding women’s economic participation. Iqbal (2014), in his research on Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants in Australia, identified male control and domination as one of the primary reasons for higher female unemployment rates than those for males in both Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. Shafiq (2016), in her research among Bangladeshi migrants in Australia, has found that non-participation in the labour market is much more common for women (30%) than it is for men (2%). She identified patriarchal mentality, male domination, and perceived lower social status of women, among others, to be the deterrents of women’s labour participation. In studying the cultural adaptation of Bangladeshi migrant women in Melbourne, Begum (2021) also emphasised that male chauvinist cultural norms are a major influence behind the lower economic capital of Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia. Despite Mala’s husband’s furious reaction, when Mala kept looking for a job, her in-laws and family friends from the community suggested her husband that he should impregnate her with another baby so that she would become unable to look for a job. “...it was obvious that if I became pregnant and had another baby, I wouldn’t be able to try to get a job for a long, long time”, Mala said.

6. Conclusions: Disparity and the Financial Vulnerability

Migrant women’s labour participation is highly significant for both the host country and the migrant community. Labour participation creates a bridge between the individual and the wider community, which benefits both. While migrant women’s labour participation brings diversity to the workforce, both in terms of gender and ethnicity, the participation also improves organizational performance (Harmony Alliance 2019). Research (Hunt et al. 2018) confirmed that companies that had more women in top leadership positions were 27 per cent more likely to do better in the long run compared to their competitors. Companies with a diverse group of people from different ethnic backgrounds in their top management were 33 per cent more likely to make more profit than their competitors.
Participating in the workforce also is a critical activity in a person’s life that shapes one’s identity and increases their engagement in society. It provides financial security and constructs a sense of belonging on the individual level. For migrant women, employment empowered them with financial autonomy, confidence, and greater bargaining power in family affairs (Syed et al. 2020).

Most importantly, a lack of independent financial resources resulting in financial dependency is one of the main reasons immigrant women remain in domestic violence situations (El Matrah et al. 2011). In Australia, financial dependency and uncertainty make it more challenging for migrant women to leave violent relationships (Singh 2021). One of the Bangladeshi migrant women participants in Begum’s (2021, p. 163) research, Anima, said, “...financial insecurity was a prime concern for my independent life. I used to take money from my father before I got married and I was habituated with it. ...after I got married at 18 years of age, I couldn’t earn any money. ...I did not feel the money of my husband was mine”. Amina’s testimony confirms what has already been reiterated by much research that lack of access to financial resources makes women remain with or return to an abusive partner (Sullivan 1991), unable to leave (Johnson 1992), tolerate abusive behaviours (Fields 1978), and put up with ever-increasing severity of abuse (Kalmuss and Straus 1982). Women across cultures who are financially dependent on their partners are less likely to leave because of fear of becoming homeless and being unable to support themselves and their children since women’s scarcity of gaining and maintaining financial resources impacts their getting out to safety and out of an abusive relationship (Sanders 2007). Safia, one of the participants in this study who was completely dependent on her husband for financial support, said, “I did not know how to survive all alone. How would I support myself and the children?” Ayesha said, “I did not know how to earn money, or how to do anything except cooking, cleaning, and doing the house chores. How would I support myself if I left? How would I survive without him?”

These studies directly correlate lack of financial income with financial dependence, which has been identified as a critical factor that traps migrant women in abusive relationships. The paradox of disparity between higher education attainment and lower labour participation not only undermines the potential contribution that well-educated Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women could make to the Australian economy but also heightens their financial vulnerability. Financial income and autonomy are major enablers for women from any background for exercising their agency. The inability to generate independent income severely restricts their ability to escape domestic violence and negatively affects their ability to provide for themselves and their children, further entrenching the cycle of abuse and exploitation. In conclusion, enhancing the labour participation of Bangladeshi migrant Muslim women in Australia is not merely an economic imperative but a social justice issue that requires urgent attention. Addressing this disparity with further insightful investigation and research can potentially reduce these women’s financial vulnerability, increase their autonomy, and offer a pathway out of domestic violence, ultimately benefitting both the individuals and the broader Australian community.

The experiences of the participants in this study also reveal that their educational achievements do not necessarily translate into employment opportunities or financial independence. Instead, internal barriers such as restrictive cultural norms, religious expectations, and significant domestic responsibilities create a context where their potential contributions are shifted and their financial vulnerability is increased. These factors contribute to a systemic issue that goes beyond individual capabilities, reflecting a broader societal challenge. Addressing these internal barriers is essential for empowering these women, allowing them to utilize their education fully and contribute meaningfully to the workforce. By focusing on these underlying issues, this paper underscores the need for targeted interventions and policy reforms that can bridge the gap between educational attainment and labour market participation, ensuring that these women are not only educated but also financially active and autonomous. This approach is crucial for fostering an
inclusive society where every individual, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential and contribute to the collective prosperity.

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