

Being good wives and ideal migrants: Experiences of Indian marriage migrant women in Canada

GENDERED MIGRATION TO CANADA

The Canadian immigration model shows a clear gendered division between paid work and economic activity on the one hand and domestic labour on the other (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2002). The points system recognizes paid work performed in the public sphere; it does not account for unpaid care and domestic work, which is still largely the burden of women. Women migrate to Canada primarily as spouses or dependants, whether in the economic class or the family class. For instance, in 2013, 34.3 percent of total female permanent residents were admitted under the family class; 54.1 percent were admitted under the economic class, and within this group, just over one-third were admitted as principal applicants while the rest were the spouse or dependant of a principal applicant (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Marriages in India and the Indian diaspora are commonly “arranged,” as seen in the recent Netflix show *Indian Matchmaking* (Mundhra, 2020). These are compulsory heterosexual marriages between a man and a woman sought within acceptable parameters of caste, class, religion, region, and language; and decided upon primarily by their respective families, or with the families’ involvement and approval (Tamalapakula, 2019). After marriage, women are expected to live with their husbands and/or their in-laws in most communities, known as the patrilocal norm. Within India, married women constitute the largest number of intra-country migrants. Palriwala and Uberoi (2005) argue that in India, “brides are the epitome of the permanent migrant” (p. 28) because married

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women take on a different subjectivity when they move to their marital household.

TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE MIGRATION TO CANADA

When it comes to transnational marriage migration for Indian women, the caste, class, regional, religious, and patrilocal norms are mapped onto crossing national borders. For instance, in 2016, migration from India to join a spouse in Canada constituted 21.9 percent of all Indian migrants; within this group, 65.9 percent were women (Statistics Canada, 2016). Spousal sponsorship and family reunification policies allowed women, once they had migrated and/or acquired citizenship, to enable other family members to migrate. Through arranged marriage practices, transnational marriages became understood as “fully modern means of negotiating the boundaries of citizenship imposed by states” among certain dominant caste communities in India (Mooney, 2006, p. 360). This kinship-community-based approach to marriage as a migration pathway stands in contrast to the “ideal migrant” sought by Canada: an individual who is highly educated, skilled, and experienced and who answers Canadian economic needs.

Over the past decade, restrictions have been placed on spousal sponsorship visas; both spouses are now required to be economically self-sufficient.

In 2011, the Conservative government launched an anti-marriage-fraud campaign targeting migrants from India, even as particular South Asian communities in Canada are held up as “model minorities” placed in opposition to, and in competition with, Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities (Upadhyay, 2019). Transnational arranged marriages were scrutinized for not exhibiting sufficient evidence of “conjugal” as defined by evidence of a romantic relationship. Canadian visa officials in India constructed inclusion and exclusion criteria for relationships to be classified as “real” or “fake” largely on the basis of local hegemonic cultures, and any evidence of deviation from these norms was seen as suspect (Gaucher, 2018). When Canadian visa officials held the power to decide and evaluate what defined a “valid” legitimate marriage eligible for citizenship and/or residency, the Canadian state came to play a part in the lives, practices, and performances of rituals of Indian women and men who aspire to migrate.

EXPERIENCES OF INDIAN MARRIAGE MIGRANT WOMEN

In my research with 24 Indian marriage migrant women to Canada, 14 had “led” the migration process as the primary applicants, as workers or students, which violated the patrilocal norm. The remaining women migrated as spouses or dependants. A majority of my respondents shared that, as new migrants, they

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needed to be flexible and open-minded in their approach to Canadian life. For instance, taking up “survival jobs”—service or factory jobs, often at minimum wage—were not considered degrading or deskilling, but rather a part of the journey toward establishing themselves. Women also considered these qualities important for their marriage to weather the challenges of immigration—the need to have open discussions with their husbands, to be flexible in sharing in domestic chores, and to do whatever was necessary to survive the change. This process was not always smooth. According to one of my respondents:

Counselling can help people adjust. But both partners have to be willing. I feel the government should provide it along with all the career services!

With this suggestion, she demonstrates how women struggle to reconcile their roles as good wives and good (future) citizens. Her solution suggests bringing the Canadian state back into the responsibility of ensuring that new immigrants, as individuals and as a couple, can sustain their marriage. In the absence of established community networks, or without their family’s support if they had broken patrilocal or arranged marriage norms,

women looked toward state and government programs as a means of support.

Overall, my respondents aspired to embody the qualities of the self-sufficient and competitive migrant-worker-citizen that Canada wants. While most presented self-narratives of overall contentment, excitement, and preparedness for the struggles of life in Canada, each respondent shared stories of friends, neighbours, or colleagues who were depressed at the social isolation, who were unable to cope with the downward class mobility, who experienced acute acculturative stress, and who eventually “gave up” and returned to India. These stories served as cautionary tales, not only about the challenges of immigration, but also about the price women seemed destined to pay for desiring to move away from their families, advance their careers, and, in a few cases, set the terms for the mobility of their marriages instead of leaving it in their husbands’ hands. 🍁

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