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**Those Glass Chains that bind you: How British Pakistani Muslim women professionals experience career, faith and family**

**Abstract**

**This paper contributes to gender and diversity research through proposing a new theoretical construct: glass chains. We develop ‘glass chains’ as a metaphor to illuminate how highly educated British Pakistani Muslim women professionals in the UK negotiate a fine balance between faith, family and personal ambition.**

**Using a qualitative approach, we highlight tensions between religious and familial guidance within Islam, and workplace practices. Drawing upon the construct ‘glass chains’, we articulate how 37 British Pakistani Muslim career women felt bound, by invisible glass chains, to the tenets of their faith. We show how the pull of glass chains obliged these women to resist certain career-advancing opportunities. In so doing, we borrow from French philosopher Michel Foucault ideas about self-oriented moral codes, engaging with his arguments that individuals may prioritise, over other obligations, the ties (or glass chains) which bind them to personal value sets in order that they may become ‘ethical selves’.**

**While previous glass metaphors highlight barriers to female progression from external and structural angles, ‘glass chains’ are, by contrast, concerned with the potential for internal and personal constraints on women’s ambitions. The metaphor ‘glass chains’ may be extended to enhance understanding of career constraints among other workers.**

**Introduction**

Our study of British Pakistani Muslim women professionals occurs in the broader context of a ‘chronic underrepresentation’ of women in senior-level positions (Joshi *et al.,*2015: 147) with ‘glass’ barriers to women’s career advancement remaining, arguably, as impenetrable today as in the past (Bennett, 2002; Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014; Powell and Butterfield, 2015). Diversity research identifies how the greatest disavantage in labour markets occurs among ethnic minority women managers (Cook and Glass, 2014). This group occupy less than 2 percent of ‘FTSE’ board positions in the U.K. (Parker, 2017), suffer a higher wage gap compared to other executives (Catalyst, 2017), and are often placed in high-risk roles (Cook and Glass, 2014) known as ‘glass cliffs’ (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, see also Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011).

Within gender and diversity research, Muslim women in the Global North are pinpointed as particularly exposed to workplace discrimination because they are vulnerable to ‘negative steroptyp[ing]’ (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013:673; Syed and Pio, 2010), with almost one quarter of employers ‘hesitant’ about recruiting Muslim women, and interview panels four times as likely to ask unlawful questions about ‘family obligations’ (Bagley and Abubaker, 2017:21; see also Kamenou *et al*., 2012). For these reasons, additional research on Muslim women and employment is advocated, taking account of religious and familial obligations which ‘accentuate tensions between the spheres of work and family’ (Kamenou, 2008: s105; see also Ali *et al.,* 2017 ; Syed and Pio, 2010).

Responding to such calls, we propose a new metaphor - ‘glass chains’ - as a means of illuminating how 37 professionally employed British Pakistani women, self-identifying both as practicing Muslims and as career-oriented, negotiated a fine balance between faith and family; profession and personal ambition. Through qualitative interviews we show how, while differing in age and experience, all women understood themselves as tied (or chained) to religious and family values, even if they perceived such values as potentially career-limiting, and even on occasions when the glass chains of faith and family diverged from their personal preferences (see also Hekman *et al*., 2017).

The construct ‘glass chains’ offers an alternative approach from previous glass metaphors (for instance, glass ceilings), which identify the powerful yet invisible external and structural barriers restricting career opportunities among women professionals (Powell and Butterfield, 1994; Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014; Ryan and Haslam, 2005). By contrast, the metaphor glass chains extends gender and diversity debate through foregrounding internal perspectives on career, showing how individuals (in this case British Pakistani Muslim women) might be bound to certain religious and family traditions, which do not align easily with their professional aspirations.

To help understand how glass chains tied our 37 Muslim respondents so closely to their faith and family, we engage with the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1991) regarding a tendency, among human subjects, to discipline personal behaviours in keeping with subjective value sets and moral codes: what Foucault describes as the ‘ethical self’. We show how our respondents’ desire to be an ‘ethical self’ metaphorically chained them to self-disciplinary behaviours, which potentially compromised personal ambition and preference.

We conclude by suggesting that the metaphor glass chains has significance beyond this paper, offering possibilities for further contributions to gender and diversity research.

**Muslim women: family and career in the Global North**

The situation of Muslim women within organizations in the Global North is highlighted as important within gender and diversity research, due to evidence that this group suffers heightened discrimination compared with other workers (Pio and Syed, 2018; Essers and Benschop, 2009; Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006; Arifeen and Gatrell, 2013). The need for more research on Muslim women’s career experience is supported in relation both to the logic of changing demographics (Lipka, 2017) and fairness (van Laer and Janssens, 2011).

As regards demographics, by 2050 in the USA, Islam will be the second-most popular religion: 8.1 million Muslims will make up 2.1 percent of the US population and form a significant part of the workforce (Lipka, 2017). In the UK, especially within Pakistani communities, an increasing number of Muslim women are taking up higher education and pursuing professional careers (Ahmad, 2012). This increase has occurred partly because Muslim parents regard higher education as enhancing family status and engendering respect within religious communities; children with higher degrees and professional careers are a means of ‘achieving social mobility’ (Shah *et al*., 2010: 1115).

As regards fairness, despite parental encouragement and increasing aspirations among Muslim women towards attaining degree-level qualifications and prestigious professional careers such as medicine and law (Basit, 1996; Shah *et al.,* 2010) Muslim women workers face high barriers to gaining senior employment. This is due to a ‘triple penalty’ of being female, often non-white, and Muslim (Bagley and Abubaker, 2017: 5). Inaccurate social assumptions are made regarding career orientation among Muslim women, who may be ‘falsely stereotyped as submissive, weak and oppressed’ (Ali *et al*., 2017:1165; see also Shah *et al*., 2010).

In recruitment processes, for example, Muslim women may experience unfair treatment if wearing the hijab (or headscarf), especially in organizations with low diversity rates (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013). Overall in the UK, Muslim women of Pakistani origin (the group under consideration here) experience a 26% pay gap (EHRC, 2011). And among Muslim women who achieve degree-level qualifications, their presence in senior organizational positions is not commensurate with such high achievements (EHRC, 2011). New research is thus called for, regarding how Muslim women balance career opportunities (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013; Syed and Pio, 2010) in relation to family, religion and everyday workplace practices (Ali *et al*., 2017).

Responding to such a call is not, however, straightforward. The othering of Muslim women in the UK is subtle and hard to identify (van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Difficulties in delineating unfair practices may occur because research on Muslim women has until recently tended to emphasise race, with other social categories such as religion and family underemphasised (Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006; Kamenou, 2008; van Laer and Janssens, 2011; Arifeen and Gatrell, 2013). Yet understanding how religion and family may potentially impact career progress is important; as Pio and Syed (2018: 1) observe, the ‘dilemma of inclusion versus exclusion of Muslim workers [is often] cloaked in a limited understanding of Islam’. Resultantly, understanding the potential limitations to Muslim women’s career advancement requires account to be taken of religious and family influences (Kamenou, 2008; Bagley and Abubaker, 2017). This paper addresses such recommendations by exploring how 37 employed British Pakistani Muslim women negotiated a delicate balance between faith, family, professional careers and their personal ambition.

*Work, faith and family*

As regards combining work, faith, and family responsibilities, Muslim women face particular challenges given familial and religious expectations: specifically, that women should marry, bear children, and take primary responsibility for family agendas including religious celebrations (Dale, 2005). Wifely duties can involve hosting large gatherings in relation to religious events (e.g. Eid parties)[[1]](#endnote-1) which do not coincide with Christian calendars, and which may consequently interfere with workplace schedules (Dale, 2005). Immediate family might in principle be supportive of women pursuing higher education and professional careers (Basit, 1996; Shah *et al.,* 2010). Yet in practice, irrespective of age and status, Muslim women may be required to seek permission from their own parents regarding entitlements to go out to work. Post-marriage, in order to continue in employment, women must often gain additional consent from husbands and sometimes from in-laws, this requiring negotiation, compromise and the risk of refusal (Dale, 2005). Familial and religious beliefs further impose on Muslim women the anticipation that they should bear children early in marriage, with parents (especially mothers-in-law) entitled to involve themselves pro-actively in family planning, regardless of women’s desire to delay, or forego, childbearing for career reasons (Dale, 2005; Khokher and Beauregard, 2014). Views vary among Muslim families regarding women’s role, the appropriateness of working outside the home and the relationship between Islam (what is proscribed in the Qu’ran) and family traditions (Dale, 2005). Nevertheless, Muslim women, even those who ‘work hard and get educated’ often feel closely bound to religion and related family customs, obliging them to seek parental and spousal ‘blessings, as well as Allah’s blessings’ should they pursue careers (Dale, 2005: 235).

**Ethical Selves**

In relation to religion, family, and professional imperatives, we articulate through our construct ‘glass chains’ how professionally employed British Pakistani Muslimwomen perceived themselves as bound, metaphorically, to faith and family customs. Women regarded such invisible restraints potentially as precluding them from accessing certain workplace opportunities (such as informal networking), which are known to be career-enhancing (Vinnicombe and Bank, 2003). To explain the compelling nature of the ‘glass chains’ which tied women in our study to religious and family demands, we borrow from Michel Foucault (1988) ideas about institutionalized moral codes (and, relatedly, personal values). Specifically, we draw upon Foucault’s vision of individuals as ‘ethical selves’ to show how, for our participants, prioritising the moral codes of religion and family was fundamental, women honouring such values through self-regulating personal behaviours (see White, 2014)[[2]](#endnote-2).

In his reflections on the governance of everyday lives (including religious life, schools, prisons and the military) Foucault (1977; 1988) explores how religious and state institutions govern human behaviours through encouraging an ethic of self-discipline. Foucault argues that religious and state institutions maintain commitment and order among their followers or ‘subjects’ through issuing strict guidance about rules and procedures. Adherence to such guidance involves performance of rituals and routines which are defined as ‘moral codes’ (White, 2014:492). Followers are encouraged to become ‘ethical selves’ through regulating personal behaviours in accordance with rituals and procedures, both for the purpose of showing respect to the relevant higher authority (God or the state) and also because breaking the rules might result in spiritual and/or earthly punishment (Foucault 1977, 1988, 1991). Common understandings among religious ‘subjects’ regarding personal conduct exert a powerful influence on everyday practices (White, 2014). Consequently, religious followers are motivated to self-regulate behaviours ‘in relation to the moral code which is imposed on them’ (Foucault 1991: 352). Subjects who are familiar with the rules and rituals of faith and family are cognizant of ‘which acts are permitted or forbidden’ and what might be the ‘positive or negative value of the different possible behaviours’ (Foucault, 1991: 352).

Foucault suggests that people develop clear understandings of what social and religious rubrics mean to them, creating a vision of integrity which enables them to ‘accept these obligations in a conscious way’ (2000: 366). Such personal codes inform everyday lives, with committed subjects seeking to discipline their behaviours so they may envision themselves, in Foucauldian terms, as *‘ethical selves’.* According to White (2014), Foucault demonstrates awareness that tensions exist between his own criticisms of the restrictive ‘moral codes which undermine individual sovereignty and organize our reflections in advance’ (2014:502) and an intrinsic human need for a spiritual life, humans being sometimes prepared to forgo self-interest, rather than compromise the ethical self.

Such tensions are reflected in our study. Drawing on our interview data and bearing in mind Foucault’s ideas about the influence of religious imperatives on the ‘ethical self’, we identify how British Pakistani Muslim women in our sample exercised self-discipline in honouring faith and family. They regulated their behaviours in keeping with what they saw as ‘ethical’, even if this conflicted with workplace opportunities and self-interest, potentially compromising career ambitions. Internalized moral codes shaped the ethical self which acted, like metaphorical ‘glass chains’, to bind the women to religious and family imperatives which were an intrinsic part of life (Figure 1). Potentially, the pull of these metaphorical glass chains limited career advancement, yet women had agency to loosen the chains on occasions where they considered this necessary and/or appropriate.

**Glass Chains**

Within organizational research, metaphors are a useful means of uncovering organizational practices and patterns of behaviours which could otherwise be hidden and difficult to pinpoint (Cornelissen, 2005). Perhaps metaphorical exposure of hidden phenomena explains why, as a means of revealing structural constraints on womens’ career advancement, ‘glass’ metaphors are commonly used to illuminate such barriers (Powell, 2018). The glass ceiling, which describes an invisible yet impenetrable obstacle to women’s career progress, is probably the most familiar such metaphor (Powell and Butterfield, 1994). Glass ceilings are believed to be shored up through workplace practices which hinder women from accessing career-advancing opportunities (Powell, 2018). Examples of such unfair practices include: the excluding of employed mothers from influential assignments (Blair-Loy, 2009); the stereotyping of roles seen as appropriate for women (Heilman and Eagly, 2008) and the consolidation of workplace networks which are favorable to men (Oakley, 2000). The exclusion of women (especially ethnic minority women) from influential and informal/social networks is one of the most potent aspects of the glass ceiling, since it is through such networks that opportunities for organizational sponsorship are most likely to arise (Ibarra, 1993; Vinnicombe and Bank, 2003).

Building on the wealth of studies on glass ceilings, ‘glass’ metaphors have been extended to embrace more nuanced understandings of the invisible barriers to women’s career advancement. The notion ‘glass cliff’ (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, see also Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014), highlights how women may be appointed to senior positions only when these are precarious, and therefore unattractive to male applicants. Similarly, the ‘glass escalator’ explains how men attain faster career progression than women, even in female-dominated arenas (Williams, 1992). The ‘glass slipper’ describes how prestigious occupational roles may be tailored to fit privileged (often, by implication, white male) candidates, marginalizing minority workers (Ashcraft, 2013). With some exceptions (e.g. Ashcraft 2013), glass metaphors tend to focus on broad barriers which affect career advancement among all women managers, as opposed to considering how particular obstacles might specifically impact on minority groups. Yet as Ashcraft (2013: 15) observes, glass metaphors offer rich possibilities for ‘capturing subtle power processes and outcomes related to social identities like gender and race’ (see also Kamenou, 2008; Kamenou *et al*., 2012).

To date, glass metaphors have reflected mainly upon how external and structural constraints hinder women’s potential career advancement (Smith *et al.,* 2012). Here, we go beyond identification of the external and structural barriers facing British Pakistani Muslim women. Rather, we focus on more individual factors among this group, seeking to articulate *internal* restraints with potential for constraining British Pakistani Muslim women’s careers, paying attention to religious and familial barriers which might affect personal capacity among minority women to access career opportunities (Kamenou, 2008; see also Cook and Glass, 2014; Williams, 2013).

Specifically, through the metaphor ‘glass chains’, we present a new perspective on how career aspirations among British Pakistani Muslim women professionals may be influenced by personal values, which pull this group back to religious guidance as they seek to balance career commitments with those of faith and family. Our approach is important in a context where the effects of the ‘glass ceiling’ have (according to Powell and Butterfield, 2015; Hekman *et al*., 2017) remained strong and impenetrable over the past 20 years, especially among Muslim women (Syed and Pio, 2018; Essers and Benschop, 2009) in the Global North.

**Methods**

The research interviews were conducted in the UK, by Shehla Arifeen. Shehla is a Pakistani Muslim woman, which proved important for our interviewees who trusted that Shehls understood and respected their religious and familial beliefs as well as their professional status, creating a safe environment for respondents to discuss personal experiences (Bhopal, 2010). Interviews were conducted in 2013-2015 with 37 female British Pakistani professionals qualified to first degree level or higher, using a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling (Carrim and Nkomo, 2016). At the time of their interviews, participants varied in age from 27 to 55 years. They included a mix of professions including law, medicine, academia and management (see Table 1 for an illustration of the age and career stages of participants).

**Table 1**: Distribution of professions in which the Muslim women were employed.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Sector** | **Number of women in sector** | **Full time working**  **career span** |
| HR | 2 | 5 years  13 years |
| Media | 3 | 3 years  4 years  5 years |
| Law | 5 | 4 years  6 years  7 years  13 years  13 years |
| Education | 4 | 6 years  10 years  15 years  20 years |
| Not for profit agencies | 4 | 8 years  9 years  10 years  12 years |
| Medicine | 6 | 8 years  13 years  13 years  15 years  15 years  20 years |
| Industry | 1 | 13 years |
| Finance | 2 | 10 years  14 years |
| Retail | 1 | 14 years |
| Health and social care | 2 | 16 years  18 years |
| Management and Consultancy | 7 | 18 years  19 years  20 years  23 years  24 years  24 years  25 years |

Criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants should have been born in, or arrived as toddlers to, the UK and raised there. All received primary education in the UK, then attended high school and university. It was a stated requirement that participants should be employed at professional levels, with an interest in ‘career progression’[[3]](#endnote-3). Without exception, participants voiced extreme concern about protecting their anonymity: they preferred to keep their interviews private from both family and colleagues. Thus, we do not disclose details of respondents’ specific affiliation to different sects within the Muslim faith, nor do we mention any familial, geographical or personal information which might identify participants.

Participants were interviewed in a venue of their choice. In keeping with Cochran’s (1990) advice that narrative approaches are most appropriate for career research, each audio-taped interview was conducted using the Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM) as a means of capturing the complexity of women’s work (Wengraf, 2001). The reason for choosing BNIM was its capacity for in-depth exploration of: ‘life histories, lived situations and personal meanings in their socio-historical context [paying] attention to the complexity … of lived experience’ (Roseneil, 2012: 130). This narrative approach was important in our research which sought to foreground participants’ voices, exploring personal ‘perceptions’ and ‘interpretations’ (Sullivan and Baruch 2009:1543) of career experiences, paying attention to the influence of family and religion (Grote and Hall, 2013). BNIM interviews are done in stages (Wengraf, 2001) and participants were invited to first tell their story, talking uninterruptedly for as long as it took. Keeping to the sequence of their narratives, they were then asked to elaborate on different aspects of their lives. The average interview lasted one hour 35 minutes. A total interview time of 58 hours was generated, with a transcript word count of 584,000 words. Some interviews were emotionally challenging, with participants breaking down in tears. Some stories were harrowing, concerning forced marriages and domestic violence. The toughest challenge for the interviewer was to control her own emotions, so that she would not jeopardise the narration of respondents.

Each interview was transcribed and analysed using Nvivo software (QSR, 2018). We aimed to capture the specificity of how respondents balanced religious and family values with professional employment (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Tatli, 2011). We began our analysis using codes which highlighted description (e.g. *primary school experience);* personal reflection (e.g. ‘*as Muslims we are under the microscope’),* and process: (e.g. *networking and socializing at work*). We then sought to identify key themes, grouping codes to identify patterns (Miles *et al*., 2014) and seeking to honour women’s accounts.

Two overarching themes dominated all the narratives. The first theme was the experience of ‘being a Muslim’ and how religious customs (e.g. the hijab) impacted on socializing, networking, and career progression. The second focused on ‘being a mother’, a subject for serious reflection among all participants irrespective of whether they were mothers at the time of their interview.

**Findings: Being a Muslim woman**

In keeping with the research criteria, Muslim women in our sample, at all levels and ages, expressed deep commitment to progressing their careers. For example, Aliza (senior manager in a large organization) described herself as ambitious and career-orientated, recounting a conversation with her father when he sought to dissuade her from continuing in employment post-marriage: ‘*I remember sitting in the room and I said ‘you might as well get the knife from the kitchen and just stab me. I’m not working for the money, it’s it’s my life and it’s my career. I’m trying to build a career, it’s part of me and who I am’.*

Yet despite her protests, and in keeping with Dale’s (2005) observations, Aliza felt bound by a set of metaphorical ‘glass chains’ to respect familial and religious understandings of being a ‘*good’* wife. Thus, on marriage and at the request of her mother, she reluctantly gave up her London job, re-locating herself to a region which she described as ‘*career suicide’*. Aliza’s narrative is similar to the stories of other participants who all, to a greater or less extent, balanced career orientation with deep commitment to faith and family.

Drawing upon the narratives of Aliza and our other 36 participants, we reflect below how, as religious ‘subjects’, our British Pakistani Muslim participants felt obliged to practice their Islamic faith as they understood it, as well as respecting family customs, in order to maintain their sense of being ‘ethical selves’. Our ‘glass chains’ metaphor symbolizes how the tug of the ethical self was a powerful influence on behaviour. Figure 1 illustrates how the pull of glass chains was strong, even when Muslim traditions necessitated behaviours which women perceived as potentially hindering career progression.

We suggest that glass chains may be seen as personal and internally orientated. British Pakistani Muslim women displayed individual agency with regard to how they interpreted Islamic and family imperatives. Some sought to loosen the chains if they felt justified in so doing. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 1, glass chains linking women to their faith and family were strong, with potentially limiting consequences for career.

*Informal networking, socializing and being assertive*

One issue on which all interviewees focused was the interaction between British Pakistani Muslim women and male colleagues within both social and networking contexts at work. Glass ceiling literatures emphasise the importance, for women managers (especially among ethnic minority women), of engaging with organizational networks in order to acquire contacts and professional sponsorship (Powell, 2018) even if this may feel uncomfortable at times (Ibarra, 1993; Hekman *et al*., 2017; Westphal and Stern, 2006). Such strategies usually mean engaging formally and informally in social as well as occupational activities (Atewologun *et al.,* 2016).

British Pakistani Muslim women were acutely aware that engaging with influential workplace networks and social activities was important for career progression. They described networking and socializing variously as: *‘critical’*;*‘a means of moving up’; ‘a way of influencing the system’; ‘you need those professional networks to feed your career’*. As Muslim women, however, such networking constituted particular challenges. Religious and familial conventions conflicted with social interactions at work because colleagues were often male. Within Muslim religious and family guidance social interaction between women and men is discouraged (Dale, 2005). Prior to undertaking first employment, participants had tended to avoid the company of men except in situations where educational commitments rendered this essential. Thus, for example, management consultant Bushra travelled every day to university from home, avoiding socializing with male students during the evening. She recalled having been taught always to *‘look down’* and *‘never to look a man in the eye’.*

Within workplace contexts, however, participants reflected on the tensions between being an ‘ethical self’ (and eschewing male company) and their professional occupational commitments, which might reasonably require frequent interaction with male colleagues. On the basis that integrating, formally and informally, with male colleagues was an important part of networking at professional level within UK workplaces, women resisted the pull of the ‘glass chains’ which bound them to the notion of*‘good’* Muslim womanhood (i.e.*‘not being allowed’* to socialize with men). Bushra recounted how male/female interaction was *‘not a natural thing, it had to be self-taught … it was a concerted effort [because] I didn’t know how to talk to men’*.

Having reflected deeply on religious guidance, participants to a varying extent considered female-male integration to be justifed if it occurred within the context of professional activity and career progression. Women thus developed the required skills and confidence to interact and socialize with male colleagues even though, as Bushra explained, this new experience *‘went against the grain of of how you ought to be operating as a Muslim woman’* and required permission from family to *‘allow’* this before proceeding.

Thus, for example, business woman Nasreen loosened the ‘glass chains’ which tied her to religious images of *‘good’* Muslim womanhood in order to *‘professionally network’* among male colleagues. Nasreen explained her view that such interaction was necessary to gain the *‘knowledge and currency… that will help me to succeed’* even though it meant loosening the chains of religious guidance. Nevertheless, although she has ‘*learnt to network with those individuals that can help me’,* Nasreen avoids activities which might *‘compromise my identity’* a decision which she feels has limited her career progress: *‘So that has pulled me back [in career terms], I am sure’.*

Participants thus considered networking in mixed gender company to be necessary and achievable while retaining as far as possible their sense of being ‘ethical’ Muslim women. Salma, for example, worked in the banking industry which she described as:

*‘a very male dominated industry, so you would often find yourself as the only woman in a meeting with ten men*…*when you first start working, that is a bit uncomfortable’.*

However, Salma felt validated in working and socialising with male colleagues because it was necessary for the requirements of her job. Salma described how:

*‘I just thought, you know, I’m going to have to deal with this. Because I’m not doing anything wrong’.*

To a greater or lesser degree, not just for Salma but for all women, interacting with men was a skill which required, explicitly, to be developed. Women like Salma and Bushra indicated a sense of achievement once they discovered how to professionally engage with men. Salma indicated that she found this experience difficult at first but has: *‘got to the point now where it doesn’t bother me at all. You know, you kind of just have to get over it, right?’*

Women suggested that professional advancement required not only an ability to integrate with men, but also necessitated developing an assertive approach within *‘masculine cultures’* at work, especially in male-dominated industries like law and banking (where participants were sometimes the only woman in their professional setting). Certain Islamic interpretations tend to idealise diffidence and shyness as desirable feminine qualities, yet our participants described how, for *‘career purposes’*, they learned to behave in what they described variously as a *‘masculine manner’: ‘being assertive’, ‘talking back’, ‘taking a stand’* and not *‘being a doormat’.* As in the case of networking with male colleagues, women considered that developing assertiveness at work need not compromise their perception of themselves as ethical, as this was necessary to maintain professional status. Thus, for example, lawyer Parveen explained how she learned to be assertive because this was required for her job:

*‘Culturally as a Pakistani woman you’re taught to be reserved, taught not to put yourself forward, not to be assertive. Those aren’t qualities which are encouraged. But as a lawyer, you* ***have*** *to be like that’*.

As professional colleagues, all women *‘built up’* their social skills, enabling interactions with men, as well as learning how to ‘*fight your own corner [and be] more independent’*. Business woman Sitwat explained how it is important to ‘*integrate’* and *‘keep driving forward or you just won’t make it to the top’.*

Due to their desire to *‘succeed’*, some women relaxed the invisible glass chains which tied them to the ideals of faith and family, and Muslim womanhood. They learned to socialize with men and be assertive at work because failure in this regard could, they believed, mark them out as *‘different’* and as *‘not fitting in’* which could be a *‘major barrier’* to career progression. For all, this posed a delicate balance. Doctor Mahnaz recounted how a female Muslim friend was *‘not allowed’* by her family to socialize, or to develop assertive qualities within medicine, this disadvantaging her to the point where the friend relinquished her career.

*The problem of alcohol*

Although British Pakistani Muslim women worked out ways of managing to network with male colleagues, in keeping with their vision of themselves as ‘ethical’, they experienced difficulties when workplace networking opportunities and activities were organized around the consumption of alcohol (which often arises, Schweitzer and Kerr, 2000). Women’s difficulties centred on concerns that being around alcohol and those who imbibed it might compromise their personal vision of behaving ‘ethically’. Women’s discomfort regarding alcohol occurred due to strict rules within the Muslim religion, which prohibits alcohol consumption (and by implication, the behaviours which such consumption might induce: Battour *et al*., 2011). Yet as previously observed, a ‘lack of socialising due to religious reasons may hinder the process of networking at workplaces, which leads to other consequences affecting performance and career development’, Ali *et al.,* 2017: 1172).

Prohibition of alcohol consumption applies to both genders within the Muslim faith (Battour *et al*., 2011). However, attending events where alcohol is served might pose fewer challenges for Muslim men than for Muslim women (Berger *et al*., 2017). This is because men and masculinities within Islam are associated with honour and public life, while ideal womanhood is traditionally associated with the private sphere. Essers and Benschop, (2009: 407) note that for Muslim women ‘feminine identities are most contested in public settings that traditionally have masculine connotations’, namely, at work. Women who drink alcohol may be thus constructed as damaging both family and religious honour (Dale, 2005), meaning they are more likely than Muslim men to be judged as imprudent, compromised, and contravening the tenets of Islam – even though alcohol is often served at business related events (Schweitzer and Kerr, 2000). Muslim women in our study were trying to balance career ambitions and obligations alongside a requirement to maintain their reputation within family and community (Essers and Benschop, 2009; see also van Laer and Janssens, 2011).

Some respondents were willing, cautiously, to loosen the ‘glass chains’ which bound them to religious guidance to the point of attending events where alcohol was present because it was *‘part of the job’* and they *‘wanted to ‘get on’*. Medical doctor Mina disliked such situations. However, she recognized the importance of *‘old boy networks’* which she regarded as essential to gaining *‘high ranking’* jobs in medicine: *‘You need to go out with them in the evening, you need to go to dinners, you need to go to the conferences and sit with them whilst they’re getting drunk, ‘cos* *that’s where all the decisions are made’.* It might have been expected that Mina would take her own decisions about whether she engaged in networking activities. However, the glass chains which bound Mina to religious and family expectations meant that, in order to feel like an ‘ethical self’, she sought permisson from her husband before attending such events. Effectively, Mina’s career advancement was dependent on his approval: *‘it’s a terrible thing, to say my husband* ***‘allowed’*** *me to do it. But it’s a mentality: ‘Oh isn’t it fantastic that he … let me do this!… But it is very difficult to get away from that. That’s the Pakistani bit in me [which] will always be there’.*

Some women like Mina braved activities where alcohol was served, but nevertheless felt uneasy, in case their vision of being an ethical self was compromised. For example, lawyer Parveen’s role required networking in situations where alcohol was integral to the proceedings. Parveen found this *‘very uncomfortable. You know, because you would have after-work drinks, in a pub for example, and I would find that really uncomfortable’.*

Parveen experienced discomfort due both to the presence of alcohol within the networking environment, and the experience of being singled out for *‘not joining in’*: *‘especially when you’re the only one who’s not drinking, then that is somewhat; that is something that is picked up upon. So things like that are always quite awkward.’* Parveen’s unease was exacerbated by her fear that alcohol consumption might produce immodest behaviour among her colleagues which, if this involved flirting or anything of a personal nature, would tug hard on the glass chains which bound Parveen to the behaviours she considered befitting of her ethical self:

*‘even if we’re having dinner in a pub, for example you would have dinner, and then people start drinking. And then by the end of the evening it would get very...You know, people would start behaving in ways that they wouldn’t normally, um, or saying things that they wouldn’t normally. So it is uncomfortable.’*

Parveen was ambitious, but the glass chains which bound her to Muslim beliefs and customs around alcohol were stronger than workplace imperatives to *‘join in’* with alcohol consumption while networking. Parveen’s sense of herself as maintaining ethical standards necessitated her respecting the glass chains which tied her to religious guidance, and she remained temperate. Nevertheless, she continued to attend important work-related events where alcohol was served. Parveen thus relaxed sufficiently the glass chains of religious guidance to enable her presence at networking events, even if these were alcohol-fuelled.

For junior lawyer Shirin, however, the glass chains which tied her to faith guidance forbidding alcohol consumption were strong. While some participants succumbed to attending networking events involving alcohol, Shirin eschewed altogether such opportunities. She preferred to honour her own interpretation of what it meant to be an ‘ethical self’ by engaging in self-denial. She stayed away from such events, despite knowing the potential disadvantages of non-attendance. Shirin recalled:

*‘….I felt like I had to socialise. I had to go to the pub and I did used to go. I’d never been to a pub before that. But when I started at the firm, they’d be like: ‘Let’s go out for drinks’. And I thought, well yeah. Because I need to get to know them. So I did go. But as I’ve become more, into Islam …. I’m just thinking actually, you know what, I’m not going to go to a pub ever again.’*

Shirin described herself as *‘ambitious’* and work-orientated. Yet as an ‘ethical self’ she felt bound by the invisible glass chains which tied her to religious guidelines about alcohol. She thus held back from opportunities to socialize and network, despite being aware that such refusal *‘excludes you’* and could be career-limiting.

In the context of diversity policy, there exist important implications relating to networking activities involving alcohol. While organizations might seek to remove barriers such as ‘old boy’ networks (Rosen *et al.,* 1989), attempts to better integrate women within social interactions (Linehan and Scullion, 2008) could still exclude female Muslims if alcohol is served.

*Wearing the hijab*

The wearing of ‘appropriate’ clothes in keeping with Islam was a further area where Muslim women negotiated a careful path between workplace norms and their own interpretation of what constituted an ‘ethical self’. This delicate balance was particularly acute in relation to the *hijab*, or headscarf which some women regarded as a visible confirmation of their Muslim identity. Within Muslim communities, the hijab can offer women respectability and a means of negotiating, with family, the entitlement to work outside the home because it offers a public declaration of the glass chains which tie employed Muslim women to their faith (Ruby, 2006; Essers and Benschop, 2009; van Laer and Janssens, 2011).

On the one hand, women may thus ‘secure themselves greater cultural capital as Muslim women’ by wearing the hijab to mitigate family disapproval (as Ramji, 2007: 1185). Five women in our study aligned themselves with the view that the hijab serves as a public affirmation of faith at work. Academic Kudrat explained how *‘wearing this* (pointing to hijab) *‘is a constant reminder that I am a Muslim’*. Kudrat suggested (in accordance with Essers and Benschop, 2009), that the hijab was helpful for herself and her workplace colleagues, as it identified her symbolic ties with Islam. It enabled Kudrat to socialise yet protected her from flirtatious behaviours which might make her feel uncomfortable. She reflected:

*‘It’s nice that people know what religion I am, and I like that label. Also I like them looking at me and thinking ‘wow, she is Muslim and she is doing what she is!’ And I think wearing the hijab has helped me. I don’t get that unneeded [flirtatious] attention that I did before I wore it.’*

On the other hand, and in keeping with Ramji’s (2007) study (see also Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006), some participants feared that the *hijab* might be a barrier to career progression because it had a *‘stigma’* attached to it, meaning that Muslim women might be treated as *‘outsiders’* or *‘different’*. Hospital doctor Mahnaz, who wore the hijab in order to feel an ‘ethical self’, failed to gain a senior medical role. Specifically, regarding the hijab, she was told post-interview: *‘look, you know, we all know how good you are - but you just don’t look right’.* The hijab was seen to emphasise how women were *‘not white enough’* to be offered senior roles. As Meer *et al*., (2010: 99) observe, there is vulnerability in ‘being different’, as ‘too much difference will lead to [a lack of] integration’. In order to *‘fit in’* at work, most women thus abstained from wearing the hijab; one participant expressing fear that the hijab would exacerbate the problem that *‘my face does not fit’*.

Women who feel the pull of glass chains, binding them to wear the hijab, may be senior, well qualified and career oriented. From the perspective of policy and HR attitudinal changes are required so that Muslim women may be accepted as committed to both their religion and their careers, whether or not they wear the hijab. However, attitudes may be hard to shift, since negative views regarding the hijab may be deeply ingrained (Ruby, 2006).

**Being a mother**

A further ‘glass chain’ which bound Muslim women closely to their religious ideologies, and which conflicted with organizational visions of ideal employees, was motherhood. Work-life literatures demonstrate consistently how employers are broadly unenthusiastic about motherhood and may assume (often mistakenly) that maternity reduces women’s work orientation (Gatrell*,* 2005; 2013). In workplace settings, motherhood carries a devalued status with ‘the motherhood penalty appearing robust both internationally and historically’ (Correll *et al*., 2007: 333; see also Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010).

The problems of combining motherhood with employment are especially acute for Muslim women, due to religious and familial expectations that Muslim women should marry and bear children (Dale, 2005). Maternity is revered in Islam and women are encouraged to think of motherhood as a priority; a ‘symbol of Islamic culture and honour in Pakistani society’ (Syed, 2008: 143; see also Qamar, 2018). In constrast to white British women, where decisions about marriage and chidren are generally the province of the individual and where delayed childbearing, especially among professional women, is usual (Gatrell, 2008), the symbolic importance of motherhood within Islam means that parents, husbands and in-laws might expect women to become mothers immediately following marriage (Dale, 2005). Muslim women who resist or delay marriage and children may be positioned as problematic, parents fearing that being overly career-oriented and insufficiently child-focused might make it difficult (as Aliza’s father told her) to *‘find a husband’*.

Among our 37 participants, 23 were mothers. The invisible glass chains which bound these women to Muslim discourses regarding marriage, motherhood and ‘appropriate’ wifely conduct exerted a powerful constraint on their choices. For example, the glass chains which bound hospital consultant Mehreen to religious and familial criteria for ideal Muslim womanhood meant that, in order to feel like an ‘ethical self’, she must marry and become a mother, even though Mehreen did not want children at all. For reasons of personal ambition, Mehreen had since age 18 turned down prospective husbands, giving in finally to the metaphorical glass chains of faith (and her father’s wishes) in her twenties. Once married, Mehreen gave birth for the sole reason of pleasing family, her personal preference being to pursue her medical career and avoid motherhood altogether.

*‘I didn’t want children. Because I wanted to carry on with my career and I thought it would hinder things in hospital medicine, where there’s very few women with children. Very,* ***very*** *few women. Mothers become GPs, but they don’t stay in hospital medicine. And I was wondering: How I would manage both things? So I didn’t want children* ***at all****. But I could see that it was a real issue for [my husband]; … he wanted children and it was really,* ***really*** *an issue for his family. So I had my first child at 27. And subsequently it made it very, very hard, combining the two’.*

Mehreen showed her commitment to religious and familial guidance through being an obedient wife and daughter. Although Mehreen’s career is progressing well, she believes she would be even more successful had she broken the ‘glass chains’ imposed on Muslim women regarding motherhood, which she saw as a constraint on her own success compared with white women doctors: ‘*Most* [female hospital doctors] *won’t have children - being a mother is a barrier, especially with the hours we have to work’.*

Some women who personally desired children (rather than becoming mothers only to fulfil religious and familial requirements) gave birth at a younger age than they would have chosen, in order to respect the glass chains of Islam. Lawyer Parveen described becoming a young mother, though she would have preferred first to consolidate her career in the manner of her non-Muslim counterparts, who delayed childbearing until they gained senior status:

*‘In my law firm it was unheard of for a woman to get married and have children at such a young age. And when I did get pregnant it was really like, you know, ‘At this age you’re getting married, you’re having* ***children****?’ The women would normally only become pregnant after becoming a partner in the firm, which is normally at about age 35 plus. And I’d seen women who were older, much older, 35, 40, …er… 45, and then they would become pregnant. So they would really, really progress their career as far as they could go, and [only]* ***then*** *have children.’*

Parveen considered young motherhood to have restricted her career advancement, but hoped that opportunities might arise for her later on. Similarly, manager Bilquis believed, had she not become a young mother ‘*for family reasons’* that she would have been:

*‘a lot further on in my career’*

Nevertheless Bilquis combined optimism with determination and intended to pursue a more influential role:

*‘Maybe in ten years’ time, with the children growing up, yeah I probably see that I will be working in a more strategic role… And may be in a bigger, more national organization. More of a national role, rather than a local one. That’s where I would like to see myself in ten years’.*

Other women however, such as academic Saleha, felt that career opportunities had been lost forever. Due to the religious and familial glass chains which bound her to motherhood, Saleha’s inability to delay child bearing and prioritise publication had constrained her capacity to gain promotion to professor. Saleha saw herself being pushed out of her scholarly position and into a less attractive management role:

*‘I can’t work the way I used to work, I physically can’t. Because I’ve got a young family [so] it may be that I have to become more of a manager, rather than a researcher. And I sort of have been [given] a few management roles and I think that might be one way that I may have to go. Or, I will sort of be pushed into going’.*

In relation to practice, Muslim women with children may require work-family initiatives to support work-life balance and professional development at an earlier career stage than many equivalent non-Muslim workers, meaning that work-family policies require to be inclusive, targeted and flexible (Ali *et al.,* 2016).

**Discussion**

According to Özbilgin et al, (2011:14) management policy and research ‘is not yet aligned with the heterogeneity of work–life experiences in labor markets’. Our new metaphorical construct ‘glass chains’ contributes to gender and diversity research a theoretical perspective which (differently from previous glass metaphors) illuminates from an internal perspective how potential career progress may, among some workers, be constrained by personal value sets: the ‘ethical self’. Figure 1 below illustrates how the construct glass chains illuminates internal constraints on British Pakistani Muslim women, who in desiring to be ‘ethical selves’, may feel tied to self-disciplinary behaviours in respect of faith and family. Women negotiate a delicate path, balancing respect for the constraints of the glass chains with the pull towards personal preferences, ambitions and career progress.

**Figure 1**: British Pakistani Muslim career women and the Glass Chains which tie them to faith and family

Figure 1 further illustrates how the construct of glass chains as invisible ties which may be loosened (or in theory broken, although none or our participants had chosen to break off from faith and family) allows for the idea of personal agency, with women able to negotiate how they interpret and balance religious and family ties in relation to career.

Looking to the future, the construct glass chains could be useful in helping western organizations develop better understandings of Muslim women’s needs in relation to balancing faith, family, personal ambition and professional careers.

In Table 2 below, we make suggestions regarding how organizations could offer better support to Muslim women. We qualify these ideas, however, with an acknowledgement that the organizational customs and attitudes which cause internal conflicts for British Pakistani Muslim women are deeply ingrained. We cannot, therefore, regard the practical steps noted in Table 2 as solutions; rather they are suggestions in the context of situations where more research is needed. Achieving change might thus be challenging (Khoker and Beauregard, 2014:159).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Table 2: Support for Muslim women** |  |
| **Issue for Muslim women** | **Practical steps** |
| **Informal networking**, socializing and being assertive among male colleagues can be challenging among women who have been brought up to avoid assertiveness and to socialize only with women. | Need for organizations to understand better the challenges for Muslim women of interacting with male colleagues. A helpful step would be to offer training and support and better understandings of the different family expectations experienced by Muslim women in the context of workplace norms. (see Dale, 2005). Such training might be useful not only among Muslim women but also to their colleagues, including men, in an aim to facilitate better communication and understanding among and between all. |
| **Alcohol** is often served as an integral part of formal and informal social and networking activities. This is problematic for Muslim women who do not drink and who may experience reputational damage even by being in an environment where alcohol is present. | Highlighting the internal constraints (or glass chains) which govern Muslim women in respect of alcohol exposes the need for imaginative solutions to ensure that Muslim women can access networks through more appropriate avenues. Also, there is an argument for reducing the reliance on alcohol at networking events, which might benefit all employees (see Schweitzer and Kerr, 2000). |
| **Wearing the hijab at work**: this was an area of discussion among participants, many of whom decided not to wear it for fear it might be a signal to co-workers that Muslim women did not ‘fit’ within the workplace setting. | Women who feel the pull of glass chains binding them to wear the hijab may be senior, well qualified and career oriented. From the perspective of policy and HR practice, attitudinal changes are required via diversity training and awareness, so that Muslim women may be accepted as committed to both their religion and their careers whether or not they proclaim their religious commitment through wearing the hijab. It is acknowledged that this may be problematic to achieve since negative attitudes towards the hijab may be deeply ingrained and hard to shift (see for example, observations by Ruby, 2006). |
| **Marriage and motherhood**: ‘Good’ Muslim women are expected to marry early and bear children | In the context of Muslim career women’s family life, it is important for employers to recognise that early motherhood does not equal reduced career orientation, but perhaps the opposite, with Muslim women requiring support to advance their careers even if they have young families at an earlier stage than equivalent non-Muslim workers. Work-family policies require to be inclusive and flexible (see Ali *et al.,* 2016). |

To conclude, we suggest that the concept of glass chains, linking employees to a particular set of values and behaviours, could effectively be applied to faith-related constraints affecting other groups of workers (e.g. workers who are unable to peform workplace tasks at particular times for religious reasons, Weller et al., 2001). Workers affiliated with other religions could also experience challenges with regard to mixed gender networking, or alcohol consumption; important as employee populations become increasingly divers (Rahman, 2015; Bell and Berry, 2007).

Glass chains might further assist in shedding light on other workers with strong value sets, not necessarily related to faith. For example, pregnant women and new mothers from non-Muslim communities may experience more freedom regarding decisions about family planning compared with Muslim women (Defago, 2005). However, non-Muslim women who become mothers might nevertheless experience the tug of glass chains as they seek to honour contemporary narratives about intensive mothering (Ladge *et al*., 2012; Greenberg *et al.,* 2019).

As Brewis and Warren (2001) and Miller (2017) observe, contemporary interpretations of motherhood pressure mothers to priortise children above all else, irrespective of employment status. Among professionally employed mothers, the pull of glass chains may be strong (Gatrell, 2013). Theoretical approaches which assume (often unfairly) women’s reduced career commitment post-childbirth (Hakim, 2011), or which explore motherhood and career only from external perspectives (e.g. glass ceilings) might overlook the internal glass chains which bind mothers to what Brewis and Warren (2001) term the ‘project’ of motherhood. Glass chains might, by contrast, provide an alternative means of understanding the experiences of professionally employed mothers seeking to balance professional commitment alongside the chains binding them to narratives of intensive mothering.

Overall, our findings support the notion that gender and diversity research requires to take account of the personal; of the relationships between individual values (such as religion) and profession. Glass chains offer a means of illuminating how workers experience constraints to career advancement as they balance tensions between workplace and personal imperatives. Gender and diversity research could be enhanced through the concept of glass chains, this new metaphor illuminating debate about the differing and complex ways whereby workers cleave to personal values, even though these can potentially compromise career.

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1. Eid is an event held to mark the end of the holy month of Ramadan. All Muslim men are required to offer special congregational prayers in mosques usually between 7am and 10 am. This is usually followed by family lunches or gatherings. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In drawing upon Foucault’s ideas, we do not offer a full exploration of his wider ranging philosophies. Suffice to say, we engage with Foucault’s later ideas which are focused on self-discipline, and how individuals feel most comfortable when engaging with familiar religious and social rules, regulating their own behaviours in order to comply with these [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As Percheski (2005) observes, a lack of consensus exists regarding which occupations should be regarded as professional. For our purposes, we expected women to be qualified to degree level or over (see Percheski, 2005; Gatrell, 2005) and to self-identify as professionally employed. All respondents were in white collar occupations which could be described as conferring the ‘prestige, social influence, and economic rewards’ associated with employment at professional levels. (Percheski, 2005: 498).

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