Life courses of highly skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom
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Chapter 5

‘Some people expect women should always be dependent’: Indian women’s experiences as highly skilled migrants

This chapter is based on:
Kõu, A., and Bailey, A. 2015. ‘Some people expect women should always be dependent’: Indian women’s experiences as highly skilled migrants. Workshop ‘Migration, development and citizenship: Examining the nexus between the arrangement of migrant lives and (global/national) political and economic regimes’, 25–26 June 2015, Amsterdam. Invited to revise and resubmit to an international peer-reviewed journal.
Abstract
The intersections of migration and gender have been well established in the literature. This article seeks to look beyond the notion of women as tied movers and to highlight women's integral position in the high-skilled migration process. Additionally, we provide the perspective of male migrants on these issues. Our findings are based on 47 qualitative life course interviews with high-skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands and United Kingdom. We found that for highly skilled Indian women, migration can represent an opportunity to diverge from normative paths and escape patriarchal norms, but that they still seek a compromise between these cultural constraints and their personal aspirations. Whereas in the Western context traditions and modernity are generally seen as being in opposition to each other, we show that in the Indian context women may continue to adhere to the normative age at marriage, while also pursuing a professional career and combining family and employment. We conclude that migration can thus both facilitate and limit the professional development of women, particularly those from traditional cultural backgrounds who are redefining the role of women in their society.

Keywords: high-skilled migration, female migrants, gender norms, marriage, India
5.1 Introduction

The share of immigrants in the OECD countries who are highly skilled grew by 70 per cent in the first decade of the 21st century, reaching a total of 27 million (OECD and UNDESA, 2013). In 2010/2011, roughly every third immigrant in these countries was tertiary educated, and India constituted the largest origin group, with two million highly educated members (OECD and UNDESA, 2013). The number of female migrants with higher education in these countries increased 80 per cent between 2000 and 2011 (IOM and OECD, 2014).

The migration literature often describes female migrants as tied movers, while acknowledging that they are under-researched. Although high-skilled migration provides many opportunities, it can also create challenges for women migrants in particular, as in addition to having a different cultural background, they may experience difficulties in combining work and family that could cause them to leave the labour market or to move to a part-time schedule.

The worldwide feminisation of labour migration is a pattern that is increasingly being recognised in the literature on international migration (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2014). The awareness of women in the migratory process has grown since the 1960s, as female educational attainment has risen and female participation in the labour market has expanded (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2014). Female labour market participation has been boosted by an increase in part-time employment opportunities (Thévenon, 2013). In recent decades, women are becoming less likely to migrate through the family reunion mechanism, and more likely to move as primary migrants.

Our aim is to investigate the interplay between gender norms and cultural contexts in the migration experiences of high-skilled female Indian migrants. We seek to look beyond the notion of tied movers to highlight the position of women in the high-skilled migration process. Specifically, we examine how gender norms, relations, and expectations affect migration decisions and plans. In the following sections, we provide a short overview of the research on high-skilled migration and gender, as well as a sketch of the educational and employment situations of women in India. We then describe our data collection and methodology. Next, we present our findings on gender norms as experienced in the life stories of high-skilled female migrants from India, and complement these accounts with the perspectives of their male counterparts. We seek to illustrate how these women navigate between cultural regulations and their personal aspirations in structuring their life course choices, especially those related to education, employment, and union and family formation. We conclude that migration can provide women with more power to determine their own life course events and transitions, and to escape patriarchal norms.
5.2 Background

5.2.1 (High-skilled) migration and gender

The intersections of migration and gender have been well established in the literature (e.g., Raghuram and Kofman, 2004; Donato et al., 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011). Gender relations both produce and are produced by migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Xiang, 2005). Generally, male migrants have been at the centre of migration theories, whereas female migrants have been predominantly regarded as dependants (Morokvasic, 1984) and as a flexible, yet vulnerable labour supply. As skilled women often enter as spouses through family migration mechanisms and not as independent migrants, it is generally assumed that men are the principal migrants. Thus, skilled women are frequently excluded from skilled migration data and analysis (Kofman and Raghuram, 2006).

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994, 3) asserts that gender ‘is not simply a variable to be measured, but a set of social relations that organise immigration patterns’. Kanaiaupuni (2000, 1336) suggests migration should be viewed as ‘a series of relationships between social and economic factors and gender’. Lutz (2010) presents gender as a frame for understanding migratory processes: labour market segments at the macro level; organisation of work at the meso level; and individual practices, identities, and positions and the micro level.

Research on gender should therefore avoid focusing on women only (Mahler and Pessar, 2006), or framing the topic in simplistic men-versus-women terms. Instead of concentrating on women, these studies should regard gender as an organising principle in migration (Levitt, DeWind, and Vertovec, 2003). Xiang (2005) points out that while most migration and gender research takes a broad view of women’s experiences of migration, scholars should examine explicitly the lack of (labour market) participation among female migrants. Raghuram (2004b) observes that (Indian) women are underrepresented in international migration, particularly in the field of IT, because migration requires career flexibility and geographical mobility, which women may find difficult to achieve if they are expected to adhere to gender norms and fulfil family obligations.

The double burden of domestic and wage labour is an issue that is debated in Western societies as well, albeit to a lesser extent. For migrant women, labour force participation is often hindered not just by gender discrimination (e.g., by the assumption that women will work only until they marry or have children), but also by ethnic and racial stereotypes (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2014).

The skills of migrants and transfer of skills are issues that are closely related to their labour market participation (see, e.g., Raghuram and Kofman, 2004). High-skilled migration policies tend to give preference to skills in upper-level management, engineering, information technology (IT), and physical research (Rubin et al., 2008).
Owing to structural differences in the gender composition in related careers, men are more likely to possess those skills than women (Purkayastha, 2005). Migrant women are more likely to be qualified in education and medical sectors where the transfer of skills can be problematic (Aggergaard-Larsen et al., 2005). However, Raghuram (2008) draws attention to the fact that a large part of the migration literature studies women from the perspective of feminised roles: either as spouses of male primary movers, or as workers in female-dominated sectors of the labour market, thus neglecting both the growing number of female migrants in male-dominated sectors such as IT, and the differences in gendered migration experiences across the different roles and sectors. Purkayastha (2005) uses the term ‘cumulative disadvantage’ to refer to how discrimination against migrant women at one level leads to discrimination at the next level in the political, home, and work domains. Many scholars argue that there should be a differentiation between qualifications and skills, i.e., education and experience. Fossland (2013, 281) points out that ‘the distinction between “highly qualified” and “highly skilled” migrants captures the cultural and relational processes involved, demonstrating that “highly skilled” migrants possess the ability to transfer knowledge into the receiving context’. However, based on data from the EU Labour Force Survey in 2005, Rubin et al. (2008) conclude that highly educated third-country female migrants have lower labour force participation and employment rates than their native or EU counterparts, whereas low-educated third-country female migrants tend to have employment rates that are similar to those of native-born women.

Skills are thus spatially, socially, and culturally embedded (Aure, 2013). In seeking to understand the experiences of highly skilled migrants, it is also crucial to look at immigration policies (Iredale, 2005; Kofman, 2014). Many of these policies seem to be based on the assumption that migrants are generally men, and that women are mainly co-movers. Yet to make it easier for women to transfer their skills, migration policies should be not only gender neutral, but gender sensitive (Iredale, 2005). Roos (2013) suggests that policymakers and companies that wish to attract skilled workers should take the lead in recognising the potential of (female) co-migrants and their labour market skills.

5.2.2 Tied movers
The theoretical and empirical evidence that has been cited in support of the concept of tied movers is controversial. A number of scholars have argued that women often migrate to advance their husband’s career, while being prepared to sacrifice their own. Although many (quantitative) studies primarily used pre- and post-migration earnings to evaluate labour market outcome, income should not be the only criterion for assessing migrants’ success (or failure) in achieving social mobility. Non-monetary aspects of work, such as job satisfaction, career advancement opportunities, work environment, flexible working hours/location, are becoming increasingly important on the job market.
(Kõu et al., 2015). In the migration statistics, many women are categorised as family members and not as highly skilled migrants when they enter the labour market (Aure, 2013; Iredale, 2005). Kofman (1999) emphasises that migrant categories are not fixed: for instance, a family migrant becomes a labour migrant when they get a job.

The migration literature has generally argued that working women who migrate suffer less from their ‘trailing wife’ than from their ‘trailing mother’ status (Cooke, 2001). Geist and McManus (2012) observe that a migrant woman in a dual-career couple with equal earnings is unlikely to exit the labour market or work part-time after migration, and that her contribution to the household economy may be a safeguard against becoming a tied mover. However, Acker's (2004) research on dual-career couples suggests that parenting influences women's career decisions more than partnership. Shinozaki (2014) points out that research on women as tied movers emphasises their roles as wife and mother, and thus reinforces gender stereotypes. Drawing on a large-scale dataset (skilled and unskilled migrants from all countries to OECD countries in 1990 and 2000), Docquier et al. (2012) conclude that women are more willing than men to follow their spouse. This result supports Bhatnagar's and Rajadhyaksha’s (2001) finding that even in dual-career couples men have a stronger work identity while women have a stronger homemaker identity. Thus, gender roles appear to be deeply rooted.

Women with professional aspirations in the destination country can also be described as active agents rather than as passive movers in the migration decision-making process (Hiller and McCaig, 2007; Kõu and Bailey, 2015). Research by González Ramos and Vergés Bosch (2013) on highly skilled migrant women in Spain emphasises the importance of a supportive partner (and family, society more broadly): even if the women did not initiate or even participate in the migration decision-making, they still developed their own career abroad and thus were satisfied with the move. Contrary to prevailing claims in the migration and gender research, Guo, Chow, and Palinkas (2011) suggest that migration actually narrows the gender gap by empowering women both professionally and domestically, as they gain higher levels of independence on the job market and within the family. Gender expectations can also prove supportive in certain ways: whereas men may feel obliged to continue to work to provide for the family, women may anticipate less stigma if they withdraw from the labour market for additional education (Aure, 2013) or for childcare (Rao, 2014a). Moreover, the share of male tied movers is increasing, particularly among the husbands of Indian female medical workers (Gallo, 2006; George, 2005; Raghuram, 2006).

### 5.2.3 Women, education, and employment in India

Just three decades ago, the female literacy rate in India was 25 per cent, in comparison with 47 per cent for men (Ramu, 1987). Although this gender disparity has decreased in recent years, women still lag behind: in 2011, the literacy rates were 65 per
Women's experiences as highly skilled migrants

cent for women and 82 per cent for men (Census of India, 2011a). As girls and women were traditionally expected to be homemakers only, investments in their education were considered unnecessary. Women also found it difficult to resist the pressure to marry (Kakar, 1988). In the past few decades, however, the increasing participation of women in higher education has delayed marriage (and childbearing), and has led women to have a greater sense of autonomy and confidence in their ability to make their own decisions (Maslak and Singhal, 2008). More women are in higher education as the result of the emergence of an aspirational middle class. Unlike in the past, parents today place equal importance on education for girls and boys. Having higher education, in turn, increases migration likelihood for women (e.g., Kanaiaupuni, 2000). According to Maertens (2013), the education and (marital) age norms in a society determine the extent to which women's participation in the labour market is accepted. In her study on rural India, she found that the socially acceptable age at marriage was 18.3 years for females and 22.7 years for males (Maertens, 2013). Drawing from the results of a nation-wide survey in 2005, Desai and Andrist (2010) show that women with higher secondary and above education marry on average 4.9 years later than those with less education, although they acknowledge that the direction of causality between the level of education and age at marriage is not completely clear. Overall, census data from 2001 indicate that approximately 95 per cent of women are married by age of 25, while male population reaches that level by age of 32 (Desai and Andrist, 2010). In early studies on this issue, Ramu (1987) found that even in dual-earner couples, the husband typically did not alter his participation in domestic work, while the wife often continued to adhere to traditional gender role expectations. According to González Ramos and Torrado Martín-Palomino (2015, 2), ‘women may be impelled by gender bias in the labour market or lack of freedom in a patriarchal family’. However, since female quotas have recently been implemented at governmental institutions, positive discrimination has also been taking place. As the institutional context changes, women are gaining more opportunities to participate in the private sector. If organisations and forms of work change, the restrictions imposed by gender and marital norms could also loosen.

5.3 Data and methods

We used in-depth interviews to get detailed accounts of the experiences of highly skilled migrants from the micro perspective. The usefulness of a qualitative approach in researching the life course of migrants has been addressed in our earlier work (Kõu and Bailey, 2014). As our research instrument builds on the biographic-narrative interview method (see Wengraf, 2001), the participants were asked to tell their life story. Based on the events and experiences the participants recounted, the education, employment,

9 However, the vast majority of the participants in our study have an urban background.
household, and migration paths of the narrated biographies were examined. Where applicable, additional topics were raised to elicit a discussion on gendered migration experiences. The interview transcriptions were inductively analysed by creating codes, categories, and themes using the qualitative software programme MAXQDA.

Our results are based on interviews with 47 highly skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The research participants were recruited among Indian migrants aged 25–40 who were working in a professional sector job, had been living in or were intending to live in the respective country for at least one year, and who preferably had a knowledge migrant visa (the Netherlands) or a Highly Skilled Migrant Programme or Tier 1 or Tier 2 visa (the UK). To help us gain a broad geographic picture of Indian professionals in the two countries, we used multiple recruitment sites: Amsterdam, Eindhoven, and Groningen in the Netherlands and London and Southampton in the UK. The data were collected between June 2010 and August 2011. 36 of the participants were male and 11 were female. The gender composition of participants reflects the gender composition of highly skilled migrants in the Netherlands: approximately every fourth is a woman (INDIAC, 2009). Of the 11 women, five were married and one was in a relationship. Two of the women had children.

The findings are presented primarily as case studies, each of which provides an initial sketch of the (gendered) high-skilled migration experiences of one of the female participants. Each case study is then embedded in the context of the experiences and perceptions of other participants, thus the analysis includes data from all 47 interviews. By complementing the case studies with views expressed by other participants, both female and male, we can paint a general picture of the interlinkages between gender norms and migration of highly skilled Indians. The stories in the case studies showcase particular elements of migration and gender that illustrate not just the experiences of the individual participant, but certain patterns recognised by a range of participants.

5.4 Findings: gender norms as experienced in the life stories of high-skilled female Indian migrants

5.4.1 ‘I’m just too old to get married’

Cultural perceptions of gender and age at life course events, specifically the timing of marriage, are central to Veena’s story. Failing to meet age-related societal norms can have both negative and positive consequences for the individual. For Veena, delaying marriage first allowed her to participate in tertiary education and later to move abroad to pursue her professional goals. But as a result of these postponements she had been unable to find a marriage partner, as in Indian society a woman over age 30 is considered too old for marriage.
Veena is in her mid-thirties and has been living in the UK for nearly a decade. Her parents lived in a small traditional village, but because her grandparents wanted her to grow up in a more open-minded environment, she was mainly raised by her grandparents in a bigger town. She saw her grandmother, who worked outside the home and was the first woman from her village to attend college, as a role model. Thus, she motivated Veena to work towards becoming financially independent. Veena moved to Bangalore to attend university, where she started her professional career and experienced a metropolitan environment for the first time.

After receiving her master’s degree, she moved within India to work for a few years, until she ‘quite randomly’ decided to search for job opportunities abroad. Veena said she is very happy in hindsight that she did not grow up in a traditional village where early marriage is the norm for women, but instead lived with her open-minded grandparents, who encouraged her to pursue education and were supportive of her decision to move to the UK.

[If I had not moved to Bangalore] I would behave like, you know, how people in that village behave. Which is … you must get married by the time you are 22. Must have four children by the time you are 30. So … what I am today, I just think ‘Oh God, no! That’s just hell!’ [laughs] I’m so glad I didn’t do all those things. When I got my job here and I told my grandmother … My grandfather did say to her that do you really think it’s wise for [Veena] to leave it? India, now. Because I was 26. Which is already late for marriage and they were trying to find someone for me. But they just couldn’t find someone or… who liked me, I didn’t like them, people I liked, they didn’t like me, so it just wasn’t … going very well. But then, my grandmother said ‘She’s not going to get this kind of opportunity [job abroad] again, let her go’. And he said ‘Fine!’

Veena has lived and worked in four cities in the UK, and each move represented a chance to advance her professional skills. She has bought a house and is very satisfied with her current work environment. To please her grandparents who still wanted her to get married, she actively looked for a husband after emigrating. Initially she searched for Indian men living in the UK through matrimonial websites. Veena made a few serious attempts, but was unable to find the right match. She told that her grandparents seemed to have stopped bringing up the issue, as by Indian standards a woman of her age was no longer marriageable.

I’m just too old. To get married. In Indian culture I’m 10 years over age to get married. No one is going to marry me [laughs sadly]. If that makes sense. I think … unfortunately, I think I’ll just have to close that chapter.

Many other participants raised the issue of the marriage norm, which imposes an informal yet narrow range of acceptable age at marriage, especially for women. Marisha
(38) reported having experienced these constraints from several perspectives: she married an Indian man in the UK, but divorced a few years later due to differences in values and expectations with her husband and in-laws. Divorce is still stigmatised in Indian society, and a divorced woman has a lower status in the social hierarchy. Marisha was aware that being in her early thirties and not just unmarried, but divorced, clashed with Indian norms. However, she decided to concentrate on establishing her career. Marisha observed that while the people around her were initially concerned about her marital status and age, over the years their focus shifted to her professional life. She said that although she would like to get married again, she believes that at her age she was unlikely to find a suitable partner.

In the beginning, everyone used to say ‘Oh, you need to get married [again]!’ and they used to be so worried. But now everyone’s got used to seeing me … as a successful single career woman. Happy with her family, whatever she has … So I think everyone is now getting used to me as … as me. Over the years, everyone has accepted me … as I am. (Marisha, 38, UK).

A number of the male participants also commented on the expected age at marriage, but admitted that they received less pressure than women, reflecting the clear gendered differences in the flexibility and time span of age norms. On the other hand, men said they felt pressure to be settled in a job, as they are expected to be financially responsible for their wife and children. Shaili (32, UK) claimed she objected to the traditional gendered age norms, but characterised these expectations as inevitable: ‘The point is, it’s unfair to complain about gender, because the culture in India works in such a way’.

According to the participants, the ideal age at marriage is 25 for women and 30 for men. Bharat (35, UK), explained that ‘settling down at the right time is a cultural thing in India’ and that this was the reason why he followed suit and got married at the age of 29. Aroop emphasised the involvement of the couple’s parents in the marriage. Under the arranged marriage system, the parents have a large degree of control over the timing of marriage, and can thus directly influence the age at marriage (Kõu et al., 2015).

Yeah, obviously you don’t want to wait too long [to get married], uh … It’s a taboo in India, you don’t want to wait … when you are 35. They don’t want to get you married when you’re 35, they want to get you married … when you are 30, 31, earlier, as early as possible, so … I think another problem, I would say is … the traditions. The culture we follow is entirely different. My mom and dad are, like, involved in every decision we take. So that’s the way it is, so … It’s a bit different here, everyone is independent, you can take your own decision, you can do whatever you want. (Aroop, 28, UK).

While women in the West who are in their early or mid-thirties are generally not regarded as being too old to marry or have children, they are in India. Although the
migrants are spatially away from India, they seem to have retained this mental construct. The relatively young normative age at marriage in India is deeply rooted: the mean age at marriage for women was 21.2 years in 2011 and 19.3 years in 1990 (Census of India, 2011b). Previous research (Banerjee, 2006) has indicated that women who are over age 25 are perceived as being too old for marriage. Deviation from the normative age at marriage is more likely to be accepted for men than for women (Leonard, 1976).

5.4.2 ‘Choosing for a PhD leads to bad marriage options’
Sanjita's experiences point to the decisive role of parents and community norms in women's access to higher education and migration. Acquiring career skills is more complicated for girls and women from traditional backgrounds, as pursuing postgraduate education and/or a professional career is viewed as a hindrance to getting married, which has traditionally been a woman's central 'task'.

Sanjita was a PhD candidate in her mid-twenties who had been living in the Netherlands for a couple of years at the time of the research interview. She described her home village in India as a closed and highly conservative community. Her parents opposed her wish to enrol in graduate studies because this meant she would be unable to get married 'on time', or before she turned 25. While it is becoming more common in India for women to earn a master's degree, in her village a bachelor's degree was considered sufficient. As women were expected to adhere to the traditional gender norms and become housewives rather than professionals, having higher education was consequently regarded as just a formality. Generally, a woman's parents decide how much education their daughter receives, and a woman's husband decides whether she is allowed to work outside the home. Sanjita repeatedly expressed her frustration with the extensive control her parents had over her life and decisions.

If I have children, I will definitely not peep into their lives this much. Now I just forget that I can also think. Then it's also not good for my career. Then my career is lost and everything is lost. So... that's a big problem which they [her parents] don't think it's... it's a problem. I will try to work this out eventually but... if I don't succeed... I will be one of the thousand girls who have given up.

Sanjita's female friends from the village got married during their studies and eventually returned to the village to become housewives, despite their initial intentions to have a career outside the home. She argued that a professional career should be every woman's personal choice, and not something that her parents or husband could forbid her:

I do not turn against parents or something... but if your marriage is a full stop for everything, then... then it's a kind of problem. Because I was also telling my parents that...
… if they look a match, a person for me, my feelings should be there. It’s not like somebody should not allow you, right, it’s your right to pursue your career or something. But, uh, it was not the idea of people in my town.

As she had already struggled to persuade her parents to allow her to enrol in a master’s programme, convincing them to permit her to apply for a PhD position—let alone abroad—had had taken a lot of time and persistence, and had led to lengthy arguments. The problem was two-fold: she was continuing her education at a level that was considered unnecessary for women, and was doing so while unmarried. In her community it was deemed unthinkable that a woman would ‘risk’ remaining single—a status that is looked down upon by others—in order to obtain a doctoral degree.

In Indian system marriage for girl is like … compulsory thing which we have to go through without that … you know, the people don’t think the life is normal. So … I skipped it. For my PhD [laughs]. It was quite a big challenge in my life to convince my family, convince my relatives … You know, everybody. So that I can leave the country without marriage and … Actually they were not happy that I come here. Because I’m not married, they feel a bit insecure … how the life will be here and they’re worried about the culture here and … how I will be influenced.

Sanjita’s parents were concerned about finding a spouse for her once she has finished her PhD, as by then she would have been older than the normative age at marriage. As the villagers tend to believe that an unmarried woman over age 25 must have some problem that caused her to be unable to find a spouse, older woman can find it especially difficult to make a match. Sanjita also refused to get married during her PhD trajectory because she worried she would spend too much time establishing her relationship with her husband, and thus would be unable to dedicate herself to the research. In addition, the village norms dictate that a woman who marries should have children as soon as possible. Yet Sanjita observed that the same expectations do not apply to men.

There’s lot of difference in India, men and women are not the same, there starts the problem. Some people expect women should always be dependent, so … If I’m working or if I have a career on my own, then I’m independent, right? It’s changing a bit, I don’t know when it will have change in my life.

Sanjita said she plans to return to India after finishing her PhD in order to pass on her knowledge and skills at a local university, and hopes to inspire other girls with village backgrounds to pursue higher education and a professional career. Nevertheless, she admitted she felt guilty when a female cousin had expressed a desire to pursue a master’s degree abroad: ‘Her parents were pointing to my parents “It’s because of your daughter!” That hurts my parents. Until recent years we were socially closed community’.
Mukta (26, NL) also reported that she struggled to get permission from her parents to pursue postgraduate studies at the cost of decreasing her marriage prospects. Like Sanjita, she was from a small community where women are expected to get married after undergraduate studies in their early twenties. Mukta’s parents were already engaged in the process of arranging a marriage for her, but she was eventually able to convince her parents that she needed to continue her education. Her parents were nevertheless concerned that she would be too highly educated, and that they would not succeed in finding a husband for her because women are traditionally expected to marry a man with at least the same level of education.

Some of the male participants confirmed that it can be difficult for women to combine marriage and pursuing a master’s or a doctoral degree. This is largely because the traditional gender role distribution pattern—i.e., the woman is a homemaker and the man is a breadwinner—is particularly fixed in smaller communities, where female labour market participation is not accepted.

So there’s this social contract that women don’t work and … If women do a PhD then I guess they will just not get married for a long time or even if they do, they expect their husband to move with them which is very hard, lot of compromises. (Rahul, 38, NL).

Marriage is considered as a ‘must’ in Indian society, particularly for women, and almost no flexibility in the life course is permitted. A woman is expected to spend most of her time taking care of her husband and the family household (which working towards a PhD does not allow), whereas a man is expected to be the breadwinner, and is not necessarily expected to perform unpaid work at home.

5.4.3 ‘You make migration decisions based on the enemies you have’

Shaili’s account of her experiences in education, work, and migration is predominantly centred around the topics of social norms as push factors for migration. Other important issues that emerged from her story were access to labour market and citizenship based on marital status, combining career and family life, and parental pressure to have children.

Shaili is in her early thirties, has been living in the UK for four years, and works in the academia. She recalled that she and her school friends had been keen on studying at school because they were eager to gain knowledge and lay the foundations for their future career. During her high school years the IT boom started and education was ‘suddenly all about migration. Suddenly, it changed in a way that if you’re successful, you have to be abroad, you can’t be in India’. Shaili was not impressed by this trend, and refused to regard her education as means to leave India. Thus, she completed two master’s degrees there. In addition to working hard in her studies, she was engaged in various extracurricular activities and had a busy social life. She also had a boyfriend, which
caused her considerable problems because many people in her surroundings did not approve of having a relationship before marriage.

*Teachers were constantly interfering, they told me I’m a good student, but I’m spoiling my career because I have a boyfriend. Having a boyfriend, before marriage picking up your partner, it’s like … you’re characterless. So if you’re female, if you are working hard, sometimes people can mix those things to attack you in the career. If one is a good student, at the same time not following the norms, then they mix both and … they can’t attack you for being dull, but they say your character is bad. So I was always attacked in the class, jealousy always was diverted either because of my caste, my parents’ [love] marriage or telling me that, you know … you’re characterless.*

Having become tired of facing the constant disapproval of others, Shaili did not hesitate to accept when she was offered a PhD position in France. Although she had not been seeking to emigrate, she felt she could no longer stay in an environment that she experienced as being hostile to young women. In discussing her decision to move to Europe, she commented wryly that sometimes ‘*...you make migration choices based on the enemies you have*’ and where they are located. She said she enjoyed pursuing her PhD in France, and appreciated that in Europe people did not concern themselves with her private life. After a period of time, she developed a relationship with a French man. Shaili’s parents, particularly her mother, initially did not accept her choice of a non-Indian partner. But later, as they became increasingly worried about their daughter’s two-fold deviation from Indian norms, they started pushing for the couple to get married. Shaili noted that her parents had initially wanted to arrange a marriage for her because their own union had been a love marriage, which was frowned upon in India at that time. Thus, they had been hoping to make up for their community’s disapproval of their own marriage by ensuring that their daughter was in a conventional marriage arrangement.

*My mum was conservative in a way. Even if she had a love marriage and whatever, but then she … didn’t want me to go that path, because she had to prove to the society that … she taught me good manners and … We got married in [year, month]. Which is too fast for my taste, but too late for my parents. I had no option. My mum said that if you want to have this relation, I want you to get married, otherwise it’s not good in the society, people will think la-la-la-la-la and …*

Her parents-in-law were not supportive either. Although they were from a Western society, their values were based on traditional gender norms, and they expected Shaili to give up her professional goals to stay home and take care of her husband. The feeling that her husband’s parents were exerting too much control over their lives was one of the main push factors that led them to migrate. The couple started to look for opportunities to work elsewhere in Europe. Shaili’s strategy was to find employment on her own
that would provide her a residence and a work permit, rather than to make use of her husband’s citizenship and to migrate as a dependant. Eventually she got a job in the UK and her husband soon found a job nearby, so the couple moved together, with Shaili’s visa being granted based on her own merits.

_I was not wearing a rosy glass, well, I would get married, I will have European passport, I would sit and bake cakes and … I didn’t come with that attitude, so … I told my husband that I want to go as a high-skilled migrant on my own, to a different country. Then only you can apply for job in that country, I don’t want you go first, then I follow you. Because … people might think, you know, I have an advantage because of a European partner. And to me that was an insult. Because somebody is questioning the credibility of my work. So that was another reason why I wanted to leave France, because I felt like … I would be a second-class citizen who married a Frenchman, so I didn’t have my own identity._

In the UK Shaili had to change jobs and move cities a few times because she had temporary contracts. Shaili commented that because of this lack of job security in academia, as well as the general challenge of combining a professional career and having children—not just for women in India, but in all societies—she was concerned about whether she would realise her career ambitions. She emphasised that she had been working hard to build up a career, and felt that having a child might jeopardise her work achievements at this stage. At the time of the interview, she anticipated that she would be unable to afford to take a break for maternity leave for at least a couple of years.

_I think there is a lot of pressure for females to be successful in both [career and family life] and there’s no support really as such and … You can’t be really out of the job market and enter the job market, especially in jobs like academia. [- - -] As long as I don’t have a permanent contract I don’t think I want to sacrifice. I think if I know, say, I’m planning to get pregnant, I can 90 per cent guarantee that my contract might not be extended. So that’s how I feel. I don’t see any people having children and … I don’t have the role models around me._

She reported, however, that her parents were constantly putting pressure on her to have a child. Shaili said this was because ‘they’re worried about their age, they’re worried about my age, they’re worried about society norms’.

Several topics related to migration and gender are illustrated in Shaili’s story. First, social norms can act as push factors for migration, such as when social behaviour and adherence to cultural traditions are too strictly monitored and judged by family and/or community. Many of the participants cited a desire for independence from their parents as one of the reasons they migrated (see Kõu and Bailey, 2014). Several of them pointed to the influence of Western norms of pre-marital dating and cohabiting, which are slowly being adopted in India as well, although social control remains strong.
The society structure in India and the West is completely different. There … if you have a girlfriend, you can live together, in the West. But not in our part of the world. Because we are a bit conservative. So staying with the girl means … people will start staring at you in different … And they will start making the story in their mind that you are doing this, you are doing that. (Pratul, 28, UK).

Second, for high-skilled women marriage as a ‘free ticket’ to the foreign labour market plays a role in migration. It should be noted that Shaili was unique among the participants in expressing such a strong and explicit desire to be independent of her husband’s legal status. All of the other female participants expressed gratitude for the spousal benefits associated with high-skilled migrant visa schemes. For at least one of the participants, by contrast, demonstrating her independence and gaining access to work and residence through her own achievements was more important than bureaucratic convenience.

Third, not just the age of the migrant, but the ages of their parents can put pressure on the timing of certain life events, particularly on having children. The parents may feel they are getting older and might miss out on seeing their grandchildren grow up, and social pressures often make them acutely aware of this issue. However, Rakesh (45, UK) explained that the ‘Indian standard is to have a child within one year of marriage’. As several participants indicated, there may be less pressure on migrants with siblings who have already fulfilled their parents’ desire to become grandparents.

The struggles involved in combining work and family are illustrated here. The prevailing employment practices do not encourage women to take a long maternity leave, as a temporary gap in employment can have a negative effect on career opportunities. In some cases, combining work and family was not encouraged by a participant’s in-laws or (potential) employers. Marisha (38, UK) mentioned that her parents-in-law had been worried about her ‘for being quite successful and travelling, and not doing stuff in the house’. However, some women approached the work-family balance in a more flexible way:

You’re not going to end your career just because you’re getting married, but … I mean if I have a child, priorities will change. I am career-oriented, I’m not denying that. But when … You know how hard it is to manage both your child and your work. It’s really hard, so … I might just quit. He’s earning the money [laughs]. I might as well stay at home. (Sonali, 33, UK).

5.4.4 ‘I decided to take a break for the baby’

Ritika’s story shows yet another side of the experiences of high-skilled spouses who co-migrate with their husbands. The role of Western norms in loosening traditional gender norms is exemplified here by the couple’s household task division and gender
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expectations regarding work and childcare.

Ritika is in her late twenties, and had moved to the Netherlands four years before the research interview. She was staying home with her one-year-old child at the time of the research interview, but was looking to return to the labour market in the finance sector. She was finalising her second master’s degree in India when her marriage was arranged. Her future husband soon got a job offer in the Netherlands, and Ritika joined him after graduating and completing an internship in India. She had been looking for a job in the Netherlands for half a year, but did not succeed because there were not many entry-level positions available during this period, which was shortly after the financial crisis. In addition, she needed to learn Dutch to work in the financial services market. Eventually she decided to enrol in another postgraduate course, and to work on improving her Dutch language skills.

Although Ritika had planned to work for about a year to settle into a career after she had finished the master’s programme, she found out she was expecting a baby. She and her husband were not at all concerned about the unexpected turn in their plans. Ritika indicated that she very much appreciated her husband’s support and his willingness to help with childcare and household tasks:

For instance, even if I am looking for jobs, even if I get a job in another city, he’s ready to work for four days a week. He’s ready to come early from the office and, you know, pick her up from a day care, or in the evenings, if I’m late, he is ready to take care of … So, that’s a kind of understanding both of us have already.

Most of the married men in our study confirmed that their wife stayed home with the baby for at least half a year before looking to (re-)enter the labour market. However, the other female participant with children took maternity leave for a couple of months only because she wanted to continue to support her family financially and to avoid taking a long career break. When she returned to work, her parents and parents-in-law, who temporarily migrated from India, assumed the childcare responsibilities.

Ritika’s experiences emphasise that when the traditional division of gender roles and household tasks is loosened, men can help to ease the work-family conflict that women struggle with. Other men in this study also said they were willing to take on more responsibilities in the household, particularly after childbirth, so their wife would be able to (re-)enter the labour force. Migration and exposure to Western norms can be seen as contributors to men’s readiness to adopt new family roles.

Generally, the experiences of the participants suggest that women have to be more accommodating within the marriage. In addition to being primarily responsible for childcare, several male participants reported that their wife had given up her job in India in order to co-migrate to the UK or the Netherlands. Even though nearly all of these women had found employment in the destination country, some were working in a lower
position than in India. Rahul (38, NL) clarified that for dual-career couples it is difficult to migrate together, and that it is often the woman who makes concessions in the career, particularly in the Indian cultural context: 'For a man it’s a lot easier. He will just say “Come on, let’s pack our bags!” Most of the time women do'. The same holds for return migration. Harish (41, UK) was about to move back to India with his family soon after the research interview. While his wife was working part-time in the UK while also taking care of their children, the different institutional setting in India does not allow for this combination, and his wife was planning to stay home with the children after returning. Although the couples seemed to divide the household and care tasks more equally when abroad, they were at risk of reverting to traditional gender roles in the Indian setting.

* I think, eh, it’ll be my wife who will be looking after them because, you know, I’m the main breadwinner as it were, so … Mine is quite a busy job, so … I will, I’ll… leave my wife to do most of the … The work related to children she is going to sort out mostly. (Harish, 41, UK).

5.4.5 Gendered migration experiences of Indian women

Although the stories of the gendered migration experiences are presented through four cases, the patterns in the interviews with the other female and male participants were similar. A common theme in the stories of Veena, Sanjita, Shaili, and Ritika is their bifurcated approach to navigating gender norms. On the one hand they have to consider the expectations of their parents and Indian society, and on the other they are seeking to adapt these norms to their life course decisions and plans.

Like many other participants, Veena’s major concern was finding a compromise between cultural expectations and her personal aspirations: although she claimed she was too old to get married, she also indicated she was glad she had not married young. Meanwhile, Sanjita seemed to be looking for a way to adhere to the norms of her village without giving up her career ambitions; and Shaili was constantly breaking with Indian stereotypes, and was actively seeking to be seen as an independent woman whom others judge on her knowledge and skills, and not on her marriage or her husband’s nationality. The practices of these women exemplify different approaches to balancing social expectations and personal aspirations, which shows that the outcome cannot be seen on a binary scale of either following or disregarding norms, but that compromises are sought instead. The balance between the social expectations and personal aspirations can, however, result in either internal conflicts (such as Veena’s contentment with the decision to pursue higher education and professional career on the one hand, and regret of having passed the ‘right’ age for marriage on the other hand) or external conflicts (such as Shaili’s fight against gendered expectations in combining education or employment with a relationship). Whereas the traditional norms seem to prevail to a large extent, women actively negotiate compromises.
Marriage proved to be the central point in most of the interviews. The experiences of almost all female participants reflected the tendency in Indian culture to see women not as independent agents, but as linked to their husbands. Many women still struggle to gain enough space to stand on their own and to be seen as worthy in the eyes of society. Parents are eager to arrange a marriage for their children as soon as they have reached the normative age. For the parents, marriage is seen not just as an emotional matter, but also a practical one. In addition to offering companionship, marriage in India provides a foundation for a new household, and reinforces the large kinship structure. Thus, in the eyes of the parents and society, a delay in marriage starts a chain reaction of delays in childbirth and other life course events necessary for retaining linkages across households, and impedes the shift to the next life stage for the parents. As the case of Veena showed, women can evade the obligation to get married and the specific age limits in India by migrating to an environment where there is little or no social enforcement of marriage or gender bias within marriage, or by focusing on professional fulfilment rather than family life. The stereotypical picture of Indian society as one with strict family and gender norms thus does not hold, with particularly women bringing up new pathways in creative manners.

In traditionally patriarchal societies like India, men enjoy more privileges. Although migration also loosens gender norms, the women are often still the ones who have to adapt. For instance, Ritika was a tied mover who left India in order to co-migrate with her husband to the Netherlands, and despite her qualifications struggled to find employment in the new country. On the other hand, her husband took her professional aspirations into account by agreeing to deviate from the traditional household task division, and to help with childcare in particular.

5.5 Conclusion

Our findings on the migration experiences of high-skilled Indian women highlight how gender and high-skilled migration intersect at various points, creating a broad pattern of life course decisions that lead to different trajectories. For many Indian women, migration represents an opportunity to escape from the pressure to follow normative paths and adhere to patriarchal norms. Although migration is not a completely alternative route and is still challenging, it can provide women with a justification for postponing life course events like marriage and childbirth, and a basis for negotiating their intentions and behaviour. The home culture and its norms are then seen from distance, adding another dimension to the autonomy that underlies migration. However, maintaining transnational linkages means taking on the normative baggage that comes with it (Kõu et al., 2013). Whereas in the Western context traditions and modernity are generally seen as being in opposition to each other, the accounts of the women in our study show that in the Indian context individuals tend to seek a balance between respecting cultural
rules and gaining or retaining their independence. Traditions thus need not be regarded as oppressive when migration opens up opportunities for individuals to make choices about the timing and the extent of their adherence to norms. In a similar vein, Pande (2015) shows that British-Asian women adjust arranged marriage practices to strike a compromise between cultural norms, the expectations of their family members, and their own wishes; and emphasised that most migrants engage in cultural negotiations rather than rejecting particular cultural practices ‘as mere signs of the hold of tradition and patriarchy on Asian women’s lives’ (183).

We have also illustrated the multiple gendered movements. Women may take various steps towards freeing themselves from gender restrictions, by, for example, leaving their home village. In traditional communities, the gender norms prescribe that every woman should follow the same path, namely, become a housewife. Because the gender norms are deeply rooted in the culture, many people are unable to resist their pressure. Although urban families are more open to Western values, they tend to have the same general expectations about marriage and children. To a certain extent, however, people who live in cities have more freedom than people in rural areas to shape their life course decisions and postpone those events. It is also important to note that the postponement of marriage may be partly attributable to family patterns in Asia, specifically to the lack of acceptance of cohabitation. However, even in an urban setting, women still tend to be very much defined through marriage. Single women and divorcees are perceived to have an incomplete life, and thus hold a lower position in society. Our findings show that women can to a large extent ‘compensate’ for being single by having a good education and/or an established career. By adopting alternative pathways and gender roles, and drawing on the dynamic aspects of culture, highly skilled women and men can thus reshape the traditions and values. Nevertheless, the normative age limit for marriage can make it difficult for Indian women above that age to find a partner, whereas in Western societies age plays a less dominant role, and the partner market can be accessed over a longer life span.

The triple burden of migration, employment, and household was one of the central themes in the stories shared by our participants. Balancing career and family trajectories is often challenging, and the cultural context adds another layer of complexity.

While growing numbers of women are abandoning the traditional housewife role to pursue a career, they still need to devote time to raising their children. Based on a global sample of a multi-national company with employees in 79 countries, Martinengo, Jacob, and Hill (2010) concluded that even in dual-career couples the woman is still mainly responsible for taking care of the home and the children. However, Rao (2014b, 883) observes that women have become home managers rather than service providers, ‘combining elements of modernity and tradition, individual interest and familial responsibility’. Our study also underlines the impact of institutional factors on efforts to
achieve work-life balance. Whereas in the Netherlands women often have part-time jobs that make it easier for them to combine career and childrearing, in the UK the labour market conditions are less flexible. It is generally expected that work-family conflicts will be resolved at an individual rather than at the societal level, which reinforces ‘social assumptions that masculine career trajectories are the norm’ (González Ramos and Vergés Bosch 2013, 626). The evidence for cumulative disadvantage (Purkayastha, 2005) in our findings is not straightforward. Although many female participants had encountered difficulties in establishing their personal and professional aspirations at different levels, their experiences prove it is possible to defeat the impediments in institutional and family spheres to a certain extent by actively making use of their agency, despite cultural norms and social pressure. Migration can thus both facilitate and limit the professional development of women, particularly those from traditional cultural backgrounds who are redefining the role of women in their society.