SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO CANADA THROUGH ARRANGED MARRIAGES

Exploring Challenges for Sponsored Women

ABSTRACT

To maintain their culture and traditional family life, an increasing number of South Asian immigrant males living in Canada are having arranged marriages to women from their home countries. They then file sponsorship applications so their new brides can join them in Canada. Citizenship and Immigration Canada has taken a number of steps to protect vulnerable women and to inform them about the nature of sponsorship. This article discusses research on women entering Canada through arranged marriages, the steps Citizenship and Immigration Canada is taking to protect them, and a new study being done to see how they are working.

NOORFARAH MERALI

Dr. Noorferah Merali is an Associate Professor of Counselling Psychology in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include family class immigration, acculturation patterns and the impact of the cultural transition process on immigrant and refugee families, and immigrant and refugee mental health.

South Asians include Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs who have immigrated to Canada from India, Pakistan, and the surrounding areas of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997; Tran, Kaddatz, & Allard, 2005). They are the second largest visible minority group in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001). They are also Canada's fastest growing immigrant group (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2001). Although South Asians come from many different parts of the world and do not all practice the same religion, they have a shared cultural value system that is very family-oriented (Assanand, Dias, Richardson, & Waxler-Morrison, 1990; Tran et al., 2005). Instead of encouraging children and young adults to become independent, South Asian parents encourage them to rely on their family throughout their lives. Youth are expected to involve their parents when they make major life decisions, because their parents are believed to have the wisdom and experience to judge what course of action is in their best interests (Almeida, 1996; Assanand et al., 1990; Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002).

Even though some young adults who have integrated into Canadian society may try to challenge their parents' involvement in their lives and pursue their own wishes and goals (Segal, 1991), a recent study of South Asian families in Canada shows a trend towards maintaining one's cultural heritage and norms for family life. Kwak and Berry (2001) found that compared to other Asian immigrant groups, South Asian parents and young adults show the highest levels of maintenance of their cultural identity, value system, family structure, and traditional customs after immigration. Their study revealed that the part of their culture that South Asians feel most strongly about keeping after immigration is their marriage practices (Kwak & Berry, 2001).

Arranged Marriage

Arranged marriage is a traditional custom in the South Asian culture where parents try to find a potential mate for their adult children (Assanand et al., 1990). Potential marriage partners are usually chosen because they share the family's culture, religion, and social caste. These areas of similarity are viewed to be key ingredients for compatibility between husband and wife. The family background, education, appearance, and personal qualities of individuals are also taken into account in identifying an acceptable partner for one's son or daughter (Almeida, 1996).

South Asian immigrants' desire to preserve their culture and traditional family life after moving to Canada has resulted in families seeking marriage partners for their children from their home countries (Husaini, 2001; Kumar & Srivastava, 2005). The most common scenario of cross-country or international arranged marriage involves parents of a man living in Canada and a woman living in South Asia coming into contact through relatives or family friends to unite their children in marriage. When a marriage is taking place between people living in two different countries, the marriage usually takes place in the foreign country. After the marriage, the husband returns to Canada and files a sponsorship application to bring his wife here to join him (Kumar & Srivastava, 2005). The main goal of the Family Class in Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* is to

bring family members together (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2002a). In the last five years, 55 to 60 percent of men who submitted immigration applications to Citizenship and Immigration Canada applied to sponsor their wives to come here after marrying them in a foreign country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2003, 2004).

Women's Misunderstandings of Sponsorship

The sponsorship application that the Canadian husband files with Citizenship and Immigration Canada asks for the South Asian wife to become a permanent resident of Canada. Under the sponsorship agreement between the husband and the Government of Canada, he becomes responsible for meeting his wife's financial, social, and health care needs for the first few years after she arrives in Canada (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2002a). It is hoped that with the husband's support, over time the woman will develop the skills to support herself and to integrate; she will learn English (or French), try to make friends with other Canadians, seek employment, and adapt to Canadian ways.

Women who will be coming to Canada as sponsored wives in the Family Class are supposed to read and sign the sponsorship agreement so they understand their status once they arrive in Canada. In current practice, the sponsorship application is drafted, signed and filed in English. When we look at the profiles of women coming to Canada as sponsored wives in the Family Class, we see that: (a) South Asian countries are among the women's top countries of origin, and (b) approximately one-third of the women cannot speak or read and write in English (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2003). Because of these profiles of sponsored women, sometimes the task of explaining the nature of sponsorship is left to the husband or his family (mother or father in-law) (Cote, Kerisit, & Cote, 2001; Kumar & Srivastava, 2005). So, it is not surprising that two recent Canadian studies on the experiences of sponsored women found that they tend to misunderstand their rights as sponsored persons and also misunderstand their husbands' powers over them (Cote et al., 2001; Husaini, 2001). The results of the studies highlight how vulnerable women can become when they are not aware of their true status in Canada.

In current practice, the sponsorship application is drafted, signed and filed in English. When we look at the profiles of women coming to Canada as sponsored wives in the Family Class, we see that: (a) South Asian countries are among the women's top countries of origin, and (b) approximately one-third of the women cannot speak or read and write in English.

In a study funded by Status of Women Canada, Husaini (2001) consulted religious and community leaders from a variety of cultural groups to identify specific cultural practices that may pose challenges to women's safety and well-being. In speaking to members of the South Asian community, international arranged marriages came up. The researcher then interviewed South Asian sponsored women. While some of them shared good experiences, other women's interview responses brought out many different types of problems they were experiencing since they arrived in Canada. These included: their husbands not letting them take English classes or go to look for work, not letting them get out and talk to people outside of their communities, threatening to cut-off financial support, deport them back to South Asia, or to prevent them from being able to see their children, and subjecting them to physical abuse.

In the Husaini (2001) study, the sponsored women's stories revealed signs of helplessness in cases where their husbands became barriers to their integration in Canada. They did not seem to see any way to change their experiences or to get help (Husaini, 2001). The women's stories seemed to tell us their understanding of sponsorship was that: (a) the sponsored person is completely dependent on the sponsor for sustenance, (b) the sponsored person must maintain the relationship with her husband and follow all his demands to avoid being abandoned and losing financial support, and (c) the sponsor has the power to decide who the sponsored person interacts with and what she does and can terminate her stay in Canada at will. Kumar and Srivastava (2005) described a number of cases involving South Asian women who had similar misunderstandings of sponsorship that led them to tolerate severe emotional and physical abuse.

In another Canadian study, Cote et al. (2001) interviewed 16 women living in Ontario and Quebec who had been sponsored by their husbands after marriage in a foreign country. South Asian women who had arranged marriages were included among these women. The women's interview answers revealed a common experience that the researchers called "The Sponsorship Debt." The sponsorship debt is a family behaviour pattern where a husband (sponsor) and his family emphasize that the sponsored wife "owes" them for bringing her to Canada and keeping her here. A series of demands are placed upon the sponsored wife to repay this debt and to prevent deportation back to her home country. The demands may include doing certain household chores, giving up any earned income to the sponsor or his family, not interacting with anybody outside of the family or cultural community, tolerating abuse, and so on.

If the women in these studies recognized that sponsorship grants them permanent resident status in Canada and does not allow their husbands to cut-off financial support for them, the sponsorship debt and threats of deportation would not be a reality in their minds. If the women also realized that the Canadian government encourages their

full participation in the new society, they may have felt there is some support for them to try to integrate. Knowing the realities of sponsorship may empower women to protect themselves and to take steps to integrate when their sponsors try to block their efforts.

Changes to Immigration Policies and Procedures

The studies discussed were both conducted in the year 2001. In the following year, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2002b) took a closer look at immigration policies and practices to see if some types of immigration may have different impacts on men and women. Sponsorship of marriage partners was identified as a form of immigration that may place women at risk for being mistreated, because the policy makes them dependent on the sponsor in the initial period after they arrive in Canada. Male sponsors have more power in the relationship than sponsored women, and it was recognized that this difference in power could be used to challenge women's attempts to integrate. A number of steps were taken to try to protect sponsored women from being mistreated. Men with a history of being physically abusive were no longer allowed to sponsor foreign brides. Also, the length of time the sponsored wife is dependent on her husband was reduced from 10 years to 3 years. In addition, statements were added to sponsorship documents saying that the sponsor does not have the power to remove the sponsored person from Canada and that abused women should seek safety from their sponsors, even if this would require applying for social assistance (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2002b).

Sponsorship of marriage partners was identified as a form of immigration that may place women at risk for being mistreated, because the policy makes them dependent on the sponsor in the initial period after they arrive in Canada. Male sponsors have more power in the relationship than sponsored women, and it was recognized that this difference in power could be used to challenge women's attempts to integrate.

New Research

It is not yet known whether these changes and precautions have improved sponsored women's understandings of their rights and of the limitations of their sponsors' power over them. For example, although the sponsorship agreement says that women who are being abused should seek safety from their sponsors, women may not know of any sources of help available to them. They could still feel trapped in a bad situation. Also, since the sponsorship agreement is still presented in English, it is possible that women who know English may benefit from the changes to the document, whereas those who do not know English may still be vulnerable to misunderstandings that come about through explanations of sponsorship by third parties. It is also not clear whether the other changes discussed above have improved South Asian sponsored women's resettlement experiences in Canada.

A two year study is being conducted by Dr. Noorfarah Merali in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta in partnership with the Indo-Canadian Women's Association to determine how the changes made by Citizenship and Immigration Canada are working. The study will also identify further steps that can be taken to reduce the vulnerability of sponsored women. The study is being supported by funding from Metropolis and the Immigration and Intergovernmental Relations Branch of Alberta Human Resources and Employment.

The study has three goals: (a) to analyze available information about sponsorship through Citizenship and Immigration Canada and settlement agency sponsorship orientations, (b) to examine understandings of sponsorship rights among English-speaking and non-English speaking South Asian women who have entered Canada through international arranged marriages after the year 2002, and (c) to examine understandings of sponsorship rights among South Asian males who are currently filing applications to bring their foreign brides to Canada. Male sponsors have been excluded from the previous studies on sponsorship. In this study, both women and men will be interviewed about the difference between the sponsor and sponsored person's rights and limitations, how they think sponsorship may affect or has affected the marital relationship and women's integration, what would happen to the sponsorship if the relationship were to break down, and where they could go for help if they experienced problems.

Each part of the research will identify directions for policy change. For example, if available sponsorship information focuses more heavily on conditions of sponsorship than family members' rights, and sponsors show misunderstandings of their rights that they then communicate to their wives, there may be a need to make changes to existing documents or to introduce a mandatory rights-based orientation for sponsors. Also, if there is a difference in understandings of sponsorship between women who know English and those who do not, it may become necessary to translate sponsorship documents into the women's first languages. Furthermore, if women are not aware of where they can go if they experience abuse or sponsorship problems or are uncomfortable independently accessing help, it may be important to connect sponsored women to settlement agencies for at least a single visit. This would

ensure that they have a contact outside of the family that can be activated if they need help or a referral in the future. A clear picture of both sponsors' and sponsored persons' understandings of sponsorship and the key sources of information shaping these understandings will inform changes to policies and procedures to protect vulnerable women from maltreatment and to promote their integration in Canada.

References

Almeida, R. (1996). Hindu, Christian, and Muslim families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & J. K. Pearce (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (pp. 395-423). New York: Guilford Press.

Assanand, S., Dias, M., Richardson, E., & Waxler-Morrison, N. (1990). The South Asians. In N. Waxler-Morrison, J. Anderson, & E. Richardson (Eds.), *Cross-cultural caring: A handbook for health professionals* (pp. 141-180). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2002a). *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Canada Gazette: Part II, vol. 136* (No. 9).

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2002b). *Gender-Based Analysis Chart*. Retrieved from: http://www.cic.gc.ca

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2003). *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview*. Retrieved from: http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/research/menu-fact.html

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2004). *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview*. Retrieved from: http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pub/facts2004

Cote, A., Kerisit, M., & Cote, M. L. (2001). *Sponsorship for better or for worse: The impact of sponsorship on the equality rights of immigrant women*. Ottawa, ON: Status of Women Canada.

Farver, J. M., Narang, S. K., & Bhadha, B. R. (2002). East meets west: Ethnic identity, acculturation, and conflict in Asian Indian families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *16*(3), 338-350.

Husaini, Z. (2001). *Cultural dilemma and a plea for justice: Voices of Canadian ethnic women*. Edmonton, AB: Intercultural Action Committee for the Advancement of Women.

Ibrahim, F., Ohnishi, H., & Sandhu, D. S. (1997). Asian American identity development: a culture specific model for South Asian Americans. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *25*, 34-50.

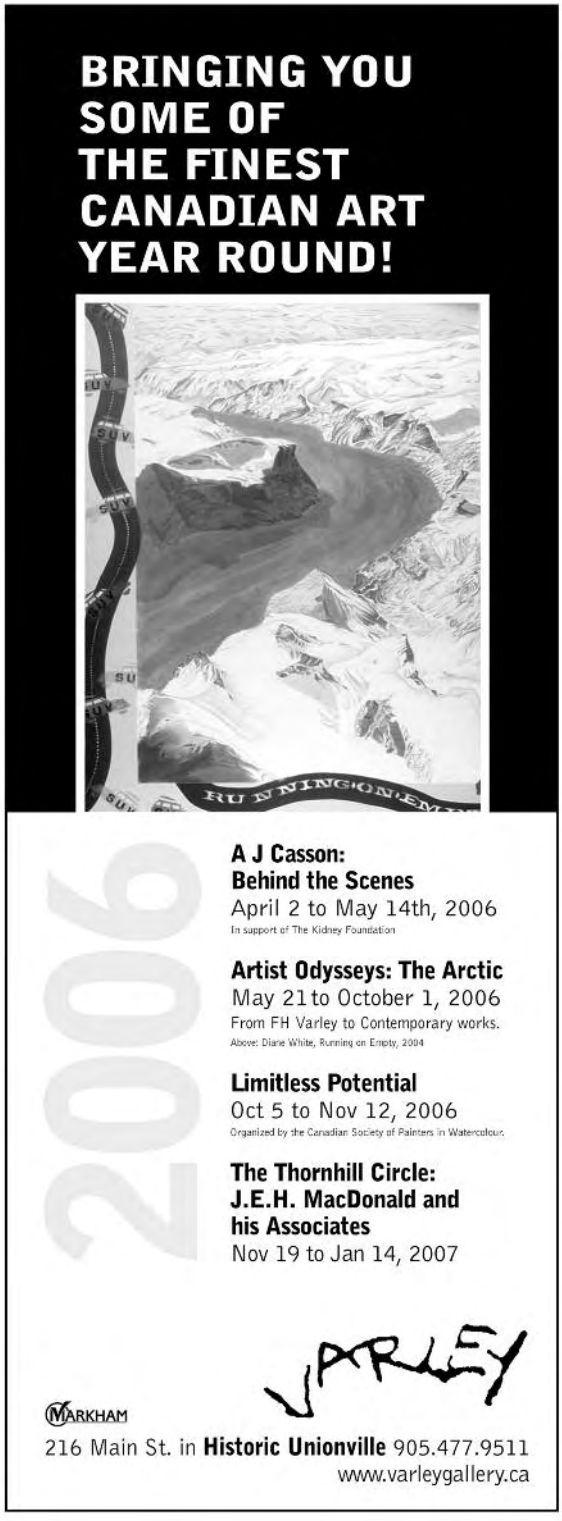
Kumar, N., & Srivastava, L. (2005). Immigration and arranged marriages. In G. Das (Ed.), *International arranged marriages* (pp. 82-112). Calgary, AB: Friesen Press.

Kwak, K., & Berry, J. W. (2001). Generational differences in acculturation among Asian families in Canada: A comparison of Vietnamese, Korean, and East-Indian groups. *International Journal of Psychology*, *36*(3), 152-162.

Segal, U. A. (1991). Cultural variables in Asian Indian families. *Families in Society*, *72*(4), 233-241.

Statistics Canada (2001). *Canadian Population Census Reports*. Retrieved from: http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/demo50a.htm

Tran, K., Kaddatz, J., & Allard, P. (2005). South Asians in Canada: Unity through diversity. *Canadian Social Trends*, *78*, Autumn 2005.



Citizenship and Immigration Canada | Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada

PROTECTED WHEN COMPLETED - B

SPONSOR QUESTIONNAIRE
Sponsorship of a spouse, common-law partner or conjugal partner

IMM 5540 (02-2004) English

This document must be completed and included with your application to sponsor if you are sponsoring your spouse, common-law partner or conjugal partner. Provide a complete and precise response to each question. Failure to provide this information will delay processing and could result in a refusal of your application.

If there is not enough space on the form to answer any questions in full, provide details on additional sheets of paper. Make sure you have indicated your name, the form's title and the number or letter of the question you are answering.

1. **Your full name**
   Family name _____ Given name(s) _____
2. **Your date of birth** Day Month Year
3. **What language(s) do you speak?**
4. **Provide the following details of your father and mother.**

	FATHER	MOTHER
Family name		
Given name(s)		
Date of birth	Day Month Year	Day Month Year
Address		☐ Same as opposite or

5. **What is the highest level of education you have completed?**
   ☐ Elementary/Primary school ▶ Number of years completed _____
   ☐ Secondary/High school ▶ Number of years completed _____
   ☐ College/University ▶ Number of years completed _____
   ☐ Post-graduate studies ▶ Number of years completed _____
6. **Are you currently employed?**
   ☐ Yes ☐ No
7. **Starting with your current employer, if applicable, give details of all employers you have worked for over the past five years.**
   If insufficient space, use a separate sheet of paper.

Dates From (D M Y)	Dates To (D M Y)	Employer Give name, complete address and phone number for each employer	Occupation/Position	Monthly salary/income

8. **Have you resided in countries other than Canada?**
   ☐ No
   ☐ Yes ▶ Give the name of the countries where you resided, your complete address(es) and telephone numbers in these countries, as well as period of residence at each address.

Country	Address(es) and telephone numbers	Period of residence From (D M Y)	Period of residence To (D M Y)

9. Are you a naturalized Canadian or permanent resident of Canada?

☐ No

☐ Yes ▶ On what date did you become a permanent resident? ▶ Day Month Year

Which Canadian visa office issued your immigrant visa or confirmation of permanent residence? ▶

10. Were you yourself sponsored to come to Canada?

☐ No

☐ Yes ▶ When? ▶ Day Month Year

What type of sponsorship (i.e., spouse, parent, dependent child, other relative) was it?

11. Are you currently living in Canada?

☐ Yes ▶ Since when? ▶ Day Month Year

Your address in Canada ▶

☐ No ▶ When do you plan to return to Canada to resume residency? ▶ Day Month Year

Where do you plan to live upon your return to Canada? ▶

Provide proof of your intention to re-establish in Canada. Attach photocopies of one or more of the following document(s), as applicable,

☐ Job offer in Canada ☐ Employment contract in Canada ☐ Letter of acceptance by an educational institution in Canada

☐ Properly rental agreement ☐ Properly deed ☐ Mortgage on property

☐ Other ▶

Give details of your plans to re-establish yourself in Canada ▶

12. Are you living with someone?

☐ No

☐ Yes ▶ Give the name (family name and given name) and relationship to you of the person(s) you live with. If insufficient space, use a separate sheet of paper.

Name	Relationship to you

13. Do your friends and family know about your relationship with your spouse/partner?

☐ Yes

☐ No ▶ Explain below. Use a separate sheet of paper if you need additional space.

14. Has your spouse/partner met any of your close friends or family?

☐ No ▶ Explain below. Use a separate sheet of paper if you need additional space.

☐ Yes ▶ Give their names, the date your spouse/partner met them and their relationship to you (for example, friend, brother, sister, cousin, etc.).

Name	Day Month Year	Relationship to you

15. Do you have any children?

☐ No ▶ Proceed to 16.

☐ Yes ▶ **A.** List your children, including those from all your previous relationships, if applicable. Provide for each their name, relationship to you (son or daughter) and date of birth. If insufficient space, use a separate sheet of paper.

Name	Relationship to you	Date of birth Day Month Year

▶ **B.** If any of your children listed in **A.** do not live with you, give details of your formal/informal visitation rights. Indicate how often you visit your children and if you provide any financial support for them.

▶ **C.** Has your spouse/common-law partner/conjugal partner met your children?

☐ Yes

☐ No ▶ Explain why.

16. Have you ever submitted a sponsorship application for another person before?

☐ No

☐ Yes ▶ Give details below. If you have submitted more than one sponsorship application, provide for each application the information listed below on a separate sheet of paper.

Family name

Given name(s)

Date of birth (Day Month Year)

Relationship to you

17. Have you ever been married or in a common-law or conjugal partner relationship before?

☐ No

☐ Yes ▶ Give details of your previous spouse or partner below. If you have had more than one spouse, common-law or conjugal partner, provide for each the information listed below on a separate sheet of paper.

Family name

Given name(s)

Date of birth (Day Month Year)

Address
No. and Street

Town/City

Country

Length of relationship (Day Month Year) To (Day Month Year)

Date of divorce/death (Day Month Year) ▶ Attach divorce papers/ death certificate.

Date of separation (Day Month Year)

On a separate sheet of paper, provide any additional details of your current relationship that you believe would help to prove your relationship is genuine and continuing.

Sponsor's signature

Date (Day Month Year)

Disponible en français à http://www.cic.gc.ca/francais/pdf/trousses/form/IMM5540F.PDF