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Waiting or dating? Migrant bachelors in the European borderscapes

Andreas Henriksson a, Ulf Mellström a, Andrea Priori b and Katarzyna Wojnicka c

aDepartment of Social and Psychological Studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden; bFaculty for Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University, Fulda, Germany; cDepartment of Sociology and Work Science, Gothenburg University, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT
The article presents results from an interview study on migrant bachelors and discusses differences between Bangladeshi migrants in Italy and Syrian migrants in Sweden, in how they present as singles. Interviewees articulate a simplified distinction between singlehood in Europe and singlehood in Bangladesh or Syria. Singlehood has been theorized as wavering between a period of waiting and a lifestyle with its own inherent value. In our sample, while Bangladeshis describe bachelorhood as a period of waiting, distancing themselves from what they see as European singlehood, Syrians tend to embrace singlehood as inherently valuable and prefer a ‘European way’ of being single. We argue that this difference between the groups is connected not primarily to national or regional cultures, but to how racialized borders shape the two groups in Europe, as well as to the role of class positionalities in determining attitudes toward singlehood.

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Introduction

In this article, we argue that the construction of borders from below, which Rumford (2009) calls ‘borderwork’, contributes, along with the borders done by nation-states, to shaping understanding of singlehood among migrant bachelors, particularly to what extent they interpret it as waiting or as a period of experimentation. We compare two migrant groups originating from countries with similar values around singlehood, but who exhibit clear differences in their understanding of singlehood in the host countries. The two groups are Bangladeshi single men in Italy, often migrating for work, and Syrian single men in Sweden, often fleeing war and persecution. Apart from their present understanding of singlehood, what distinguishes the groups is how they have become entangled in the racialized borderscapes of the EU and how individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds from each society are able to navigate differently in this
environment. A comparison between these groups can suggest reasons for the distinct ways the men experience singlehood.

Singlehood is often lived as a period of waiting. In most societies, a couple norm creates expectations that a person will eventually form a long-term bond with another person and thus leave the state of singlehood (Budgeon, 2008; Evertsson & Nyman, 2013). As a consequence, in some societies, marriage marks the transition to adulthood, leaving unmarried men to be perceived as ‘immature’ (Mortensen, 2021a; Suerbaum, 2018). Yet singlehood can also provide a lifestyle that for many come to have a value on its own. Where singles to some extent embrace singlehood as some version of the good life, the couple norm is challenged (Kaufmann, 2008; Lahad, 2012, 2019). This significant tension in singlehood, which makes it an object of negotiating and governance, is well-attested in research from several different countries and plays a pivotal role in gender politics (Bennett, 2005; Kaufmann, 2008; Lahad, 2019).

A section on method starts the article off, followed by a short section on Syrians and Bangladeshis, in Sweden and Italy respectively. A section on borderscapes and one on singlehood sum up the theoretical framework of our argument. The empirical sections start with an overview of how the interviewees themselves describe singlehood as either Western or non-Western. The rest of the empirical sections then problematize this view by analyzing the borderscapes in which the migrant men are situated and that seem to structure their view of singlehood. We draw these findings together in a final conclusion.

**Method**

The article is based on data from a four-year project funded by the Swedish Research Council. In the project, men who identified as single and had migrated to Italy or Sweden were interviewed: Syrian and Poles in Sweden, and Bangladeshis and Romanians in Italy. The Italian interviews were conducted with men in Rome and its surroundings, while the Swedish interviewees were found in various urban areas from Stockholm down to Malmö. The sample was meant to mirror different borderscapes, as discussed below. Some ethnographic data were also collected, particularly in the Italian context, and took the form of fieldnotes that complement the interviews in the analysis below. In this paper, we have opted to include only Syrians and Bangladeshis, excluding Poles and Romanians. The reason is that by comparing two groups from countries with similar hegemonic understanding of singlehood, the differences between the groups become clear.

In sum, 13 interviews were done with Syrians and 13 with Bangladeshis. Five methods of recruitment were used: we contacted the interviewees via online forums, they self-selected (i.e. contacted us after reading about our research), were found through articles about them in the media, via snowballing and at various physical venues catering to their group and visited by the researchers. The main selection criterion used was that the men understood themselves as singles at the time of the interview.

Overall, the interviewed Bangladeshis generally came from lower middle-class, and middle-class families, and were all in Italy on work permits. The Syrians were mostly from upper middle-class backgrounds, and had all received permanent or temporary residence permits as refugees. Most of the interviewees identified themselves explicitly as heterosexual. However, three Syrian interviewees told the interviewers they were gay.
Four interviewers were involved in gathering the data for the article. Andrea Priori conducted all the interviews in Italy. Andreas Henriksson, Ulf Mellström and Sonja Mellström (who was employed as a temporary aid in the project) conducted the interviews with Syrian men in Sweden. The interviews in Italy were done in Italian, English, and, in one case, in Bengali (using an interpreter), while Syrian men were interviewed in Swedish, English, and Arabic (in the latter case using an interpreter). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All non-English interviews were transcribed as such and then translated to English in their entirety.

Interviewers for the Syrian and Bangladeshi cases were Swedish and Italian respectively. All except one interviewer were male, while only the female interviewer was single at the time of the interviews. All the researchers were perceived as heterosexual by the interviewees in most cases (except in two, where the interviewer came out as gay when the interviewees did). The researchers’ gender and sexual orientation likely affected the interviews. The male interviewers sensed that they were given more freedom than researchers of other genders would have, to address topics such as sexuality with the interviewees. In addition, male interviewers had access to male-only spaces, which made recruitment easier. The fact that in both Italy and Sweden, the interviewers had no migrant background in some cases made interviewees comfortable expressing critical views of their national group; in others however, it seemed to inhibit the formulation of critical views of the migration society. The power imbalance between interviewers and interviewees led several men to see the researchers as potential helpers. This gave the latter opportunities to reciprocate, by providing some simple services (translation of documents, online posting etc.) to the interviewees, which facilitated the establishment of trusting relationships.

**Bangladeshis and Syrians in Europe**

The two groups studied, Bangladeshis in Italy and Syrians in Sweden, are among the largest migrant groups in each country. Syria and Bangladesh are described as countries with similar dominant views of masculinity and singlehood, where older men at the head of households often care for and direct families, and where singlehood is understood as a phase ending in marriage that is based on collectively determined compatibility rather than romance (Rozario, 2012; Suad, 1993).

Italy and Sweden represent two different borderscapes. Although both are members of the EU, Sweden has officially accepted proportionally significantly more refugees than Italy due to a more liberal border regime. This was especially the case up till 2015 and the so-called European ‘migration crisis’, when Sweden announced much stricter legislation on refugees than before. The country to date however maintains more liberal laws around work permits than many other European countries. Italy, on the other hand, is a gateway country for many migrants reaching Europe from Asia and Africa due to the permeability of its physical borders and relatively loose controls of undocumented migrants compared to other European countries, including Sweden.

For years, there has been small-scale migration to Europe from Syria, particularly since the early 1990s (Rabo, 2016). However, with the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the size and the demographics of the migration shifted dramatically (Aradhya & Mussino, 2020). Syrian asylum seekers have been spread unevenly across Europe; on
the whole, the two main recipient countries both in absolute numbers and per capita have been Germany and Sweden. There are presently around 200,000 Syria-born in Sweden (or 2% of the total Swedish population).

Although immigration from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) to Europe assumed significant proportions in the 1950s, Italy as a destination acquired the broad appeal it has today for Bangladeshi only after 1990 (Knights, 1996). In 1990, Italy declared a wide-ranging immigration amnesty which was part of making the country an attractive destination. The Bangladeshi community grew steadily throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In Italy there are currently 158,000 Bangladeshi citizens according to official figures (IDOS, 2022).

A distinction can be made between Bangladeshis as migrant workers and Syrians as refugees. However, this is not necessarily a distinction mirroring an objective difference between the groups as such, but rather a difference in the expectations and policies, both prone to change, that apply to the groups in the context of borders. For example, Syrian refugees who had their asylum application approved in Sweden before the end of 2015 were given permanent residency, something that was not readily available for so-called migrant workers (Aradhya & Mussino, 2020). Bangladeshi migrants over the last decades very seldom obtained refugee status in Italy, leading most of them to hold a temporary residence permit bound to their work contracts. This does not speak to how many of them would receive asylum under a different border regime. As it is, for Bangladeshi a period of unemployment can easily lead to the loss of the residence permit (Della Puppa, 2018; Priori, 2017).

In both Sweden and Italy, anti-immigrant rhetoric and islamophobia play important roles in constructing and reinforcing the borderwork described by the interviewees. Both countries witness a resurgence of hostility toward migrants, especially Muslims, most clearly expressed in the recent electoral success in both countries of far-right political parties capitalizing on refugee crises and the ‘clash of civilizations’ narrative. Many are prone to associate both Syrian and Bangladeshi men are with the stereotype of threatening Islamic masculinity (Inhorn, 2012; Wojnicka & Nowicka, 2022), although in the case of Bangladeshi, this tendency is tempered by infantilizing and demasculinizing representations (Sinha, 1995). Whether positive or negative, these representations have the effect of racializing the bodies of the migrant men and keeping them away from relations with the established majority in the host countries.

### Borders and singles

We understand borders as the practices and the (im)material arrangements that regulate the who and how of movement across geographical and social distances. Mezzadra and Neilson argue that borders constitute a perspective, not a mere research object (2013). Borders are places of conflict and play a central role in fostering identities, politics and capital. Borrowing from Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, we use the concept of borderscapes to refer to a fluid space, both symbolic and material, in which borders are constantly defined, reassembled, or questioned on a plurality of levels and by a plurality of agents (2007). This plurality of agents includes obvious examples like border guards and customs officers, but also less obvious and diffused examples of actors, such as kinship networks, local communities and, in general, ordinary people.
Partition lines drawn by non-state actors, which can be found everywhere in society, are termed ‘vernacularized borders’ by Rumford (2009). He understands the pervasive and ubiquitous activity that people engage in to reproduce the pervasive borders as ‘borderwork’. One of the novel elements of this article is that it examines not only the borderwork carried out by native citizens in the receiving country, which is usually the focus in border studies, but also the work operated by ‘non-citizens,’ namely the migrants’ families of origin and their compatriots who exert, or attempt to exert, social control over the conduct of the bachelor migrants, trying to keep them within the boundaries of a ‘proper way’ of being man and single.

Even though we concentrate primarily on borderwork, it is also necessary to take into account the direct actions of state apparatuses at various levels known commonly as bordering regimes. It is an important condition in the lives of the subjects of our research, especially as it is part of establishing a distinction between migrant workers, or migrants who hold (or aspire to obtain in the case of undocumented migrants) a residence permit for employment reasons, and refugees, or asylum seekers and holders of humanitarian permits. It is a dichotomy that many migration researchers shun away from (see for example Osseiran, 2017). One reason is that the difference in many cases is merely administrative – for example, many so-called migrant workers flee from war, political persecution or deprivation, while many refugees find themselves shifting toward workers’ visa when that becomes more feasible (Flavell & Melde, 2020).

The construction from below of a boundary between ‘here’ (the host country) and ‘there’ (the sending country) (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002), constitutes borderwork and, we argue, plays into different ways of understanding singlehood. This borderwork can be taken up by the family, the ‘migrant community,’ or by the singles themselves. In this way, borders between states are internalized not only in the sense of their physical proliferation within national territories, but also as they are interiorized by people, an issue that is somewhat neglected in border studies. This avoidance can be seen as part of a more general tendency to neglect the issue of internalized racism (Pyke, 2010). The boundaries between different ways of being man and single that are described by our interviewees are in fact highly racialized (Achiume, 2022), insofar as they separate a ‘European,’ or ‘White,’ singlehood from ‘non-White’ singlehoods. We seek to analyze the processes through which racialized borders are reproduced not only by those who claim to respect them, but also by those crossing them. We pay attention to the ‘caste-like properties of race’ (Pyke, 2010, p. 481), namely its ability to socially, and sexually, separate migrant men from established majorities in host countries (Maddox, 2004).

Waiting and non-waiting among singles

For this overview of the concepts, we define bachelorhood and singlehood as not having a long-term partner (whether one has had a long-term partner in the past is not relevant to this definition). Such an understanding of the concepts resonates with, but is not synonymous to the matching concepts among our interviewees. Syrians use ‘single’ in English and ‘singel’ in Swedish, or the Arabic term ‘aleazabi’, meaning unmarried (male). The Bangladeshis use the English ‘bachelor’, also when speaking Italian and Bengali. Both the Arab term and Bangladeshi’s favored word to denote singles, imply that the only form of socially recognized sexual long-term relationship is marriage.
Singlehood can be seen both as an interim period of waiting (to build a family of one’s own) and an inherently desirable lifestyle in its own right (Lahad, 2012). The researcher who may have written most about this dichotomy, Kinneret Lahad, connects (albeit women’s) singlehood studies with the sociology of time, discussing the temporality of waiting and how some singles break free from that waiting while remaining single (2019). She writes of ‘non-waiting’, or embracement of singlehood as a valid lifestyle itself, as undermining important normative subject positions (see also Budgeon, 2008). While various forms of singlehood are gendered, this distinction between waiting and non-waiting seems applicable to all genders. The point about waiting and non-waiting has been made about singlehood in several different national contexts, from Lahad’s Israel to Indonesia (Bennett, 2005). Yet, as is important to stress, while a non-waiting attitude in singlehood can be found in different geographies, including Syria and Bangladesh (see below), the bachelors we interviewed often associated it with ‘the West.’

Syria and Bangladesh are both societies with relatively high levels of gender segregation and frequent expectations on chastity for single people, as well as a strong emphasis on marriage as an individual and societal good (Rozario, 2012; Suad, 1993). Importantly however, Syria and Bangladesh are not monoliths when it comes to people’s views of singlehood and gender segregation (Hasan, Aggleton, & Persson, 2018; Mortensen, 2021b), and these intra-group variations can be discerned in the data presented here, especially in relation to social class. Yet, in general, interviewees themselves presented the attitudes in their countries of origins as more or less homogeneous.

Singlehood and masculinity are related in several different ways. In the West (as well as in certain populations elsewhere) the playboy was a popular image of happy singlehood in the 1950s and forward, an image that has several hallmarks in common with today’s so-called ‘pick-up artists’: playfulness, sexual voracity and objectification of women (Clift, 2007). These positively charged, although highly problematic notions of heteronormative male singlehood, often associated with the West, exist side-by-side with less positively charged notions. Male singles are often seen as not yet fully matured, remaining boys late in life (Eck, 2014). This is often understood as a fault in their masculinity. Marriage becomes an important point of passage into manhood in this view. This means that singlehood is more acceptable at younger ages, at the same time as marriage becomes a sign of maturity and responsibility – something that is common among migrants from countries like Syria and Bangladesh (Mortensen, 2021a; Rozario, 2012).

**Singlehood ‘there’ and ‘here’**

The discursive boundary between the singlehood ‘there’ (Bangladesh or Syria) and ‘here’ (Italy or Sweden) plays a central role in the narratives of our interviewees, functioning as a device for the mutual articulation of different ways of being single, which we will describe here.

In the case of the Bangladeshis, all our interlocutors reinforced the boundary between singlehood ‘there’ and ‘here’. They emphasized that this boundary could not be crossed, because men should abide by the ‘rules’ or ‘laws’ that for them structure a ‘Bangladeshi system’ of being man and single.
‘[In Bangladesh] they [bachelors] think about working, making money, taking care of their families, brothers, sisters. In Italy, instead, you are only required to work, then you go to clubs, restaurants, you can find a girlfriend. This is different between Italy and Bangladesh. […] Italians are quite free. [laughs] […] (Bangladeshi interviewee 1)

This interviewee, while preferring what he sees as Italian singlehood, nevertheless describes the cultural norms he associates with Bangladesh as inescapable self-sacrifice. For the Bangladeshi interviewees, one of the fundamental ‘rules’ structuring a way of being single in line with the ‘Bangladeshi culture’ is to avoid pre-marital relationships. Singlehood is consequently portrayed as a state of waiting: waiting to be able to marry and thus achieve a condition of autonomy and mature masculinity (cf Lahad, 2012).

Syrians also very often insist on a difference between being single ‘here’ and ‘there’, describing singlehood ‘there’ as an unfinished masculinity in which men are subjected to considerable ‘social pressure to marry’. They talk of more nuances than Bangladeshis, but the dichotomy is clear in their narratives.

If you are single in an Arab country, then you are single and that means you absolutely can’t have any kind of sexual relationship, but if you live in another country, in a Western country, even if you are single you can still have sex. (Syrian interviewee 6)

Many of the Syrian interviewees, however, while taking part in the construction of this boundary from below, claim to have crossed it after arriving in Sweden. The three gay interviewees describe this crossing as a foremost positive coming-to-terms with their sexuality. For their straight counterparts, the process is not exclusively positive:

I always thought I was doing something wrong […] ‘No, it does not work’ if you might stare a little too much at a girl, it is considered harassment, or yes, it becomes unpleasant in some way. […] But then I have understood the secret, here you need more time, so if you like someone, go and talk and take some yes, coffee cups and then decide if it will be something further or not. But if you work with someone, are a colleague with someone, yes for a longer period, then it gets better, then this fear goes away. (Syrian interviewee 3)

This passage, together with a narrative later in the interview where the interviewee talks about being rejected by women, hint at racial stereotypes (such as the hypersexual Arab man) making women fearful. In the end, the crossing of boundaries, although clearly aspired to, does not always take the form of a straightforward incorporation into a supposedly ‘Swedish’ way of being single and man, but is rather marked by ambivalence and second thoughts, as well as racial boundaries.

For Bangladeshis, the border is empowering insofar as it protects a morality based on self-sacrifice. For the Syrian interviewees who speak of transgressing Syrian norms, that transgression, while not free of obstacles, is empowering because it allows them to overcome the limits established by norms that they associate with their home countries and perceive as stifling.

**Bordering regimes**

In this and the following sections, we redraw the picture of the difference between bachelorhood among Syrians and Bangladeshis, challenging the culturalist viewpoint presented by the interviewees themselves.
In interviews with Bangladeshis, there is a work ethic underpinning the idea of singlehood: being a proper single in Italy entails complete dedication to work. One contributing factor behind this ethic is the risk of losing a residence permit if becoming jobless. The attitude is also connected to the thick fabric of people’s family and social relationships, not least the need to repay the debt incurred by the family to finance emigration. Thus, borderwork and the morality of self-sacrifice support each other to form the hard-working Bangladeshi single men that make a living in Italy.

All Bangladeshi interviewees conceive of singlehood as a transitory state to be escaped from as soon as possible through marriage – but according to a step-by-step process. Since the vast majority of migrants are ‘irregular’ upon entering Italy, obtaining a residence permit is the first step. Getting a decent job, which usually requires the permit, is the second. In general, working is important both for legal reasons and to accumulate money to finance marriage. But if the permit is withdrawn, the process of economic accumulation stalls, and with it the progress towards marriage. Most of the interviewed Bangladeshi singles still do not have a decent job or even a residence permit, and they see these facts as the reason for their bachelorhood. The structural and material conditions contribute to making singlehood less about exploration and more about chastity and work for Bangladeshis, and as a consequence they primarily interpret singlehood as waiting. Waiting for normalization and actual immersion in the local labor market, a kind of waiting that characterizes the experience of many migrants and asylum seekers (Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018) overlaps with, and magnifies the waiting for marriage and the achievement of a mature masculinity.

Syrian interviewees, on the other hand, although also waiting to be incorporated into the receiving society, do not thematize the dimension of waiting in their interviews. In their case, the agonizing waiting for a humanitarian permit has already been tackled, and they do not experience bachelorhood as a waiting room before getting married. On the contrary, they speak of being single in Sweden as an opportunity for personal development. The fact that all of the interviewees obtained a residence permit (and in some cases a Swedish passport) within a short period of time, is an important precondition for them becoming single men who study, evaluate work options, and date.

Being single gave me a lot of flexibility, I must say. I could travel a lot. Any time I just feel bored, I just go to the, just book for a weekend trip. Many of my married friends, they couldn’t do it. […] it made me feel like as I say, entrepreneur, flexible, reading, doing sports I want. … how can I say, yeah, receiving people I’ve never met before at home.

(Syrian interviewee 1)

This passage crystalizes important distinctions between Bangladeshi and Syrian interviewees. For the interviewee, being single in a foreign country is not a trap to escape from, but an opportunity to date people and broaden horizons: not an accumulative but a transformative process. Having a residence permit for the Schengen area, or a Swedish passport, allows some Syrians to ‘travel a lot’, whereas a migrant without a residence permit is immobilized by borders. For many Bangladeshis, there is a link between being single and undocumented on the one hand, and their exclusion from careers they consider more desirable on the other. In the Syrians’ case, they appreciate the sexual liberties and ‘flexibility’ of being single, taking advantage of the comparative freedom of movement within Schengen that some of them have.
The borderwork of family and community

Vernacularized borders are also different for Syrians and Bangladeshis. Syrian interviewees talked about the pressure from the family as a past or minor problem, not a source of ongoing social control.

I was in Sweden. I came to a country that gave me a lot of fucking freedom. A freedom that I never felt or a freedom that I never even dared to dream of. So I became really extreme. The stuff I been invited for, the stuff I been talking about, the way I expressed myself. Even the stuff I started adopting. Like ideas and you know, movements. [...] So for the first two years it was like that. Yeah, so my mum was like you’re not gonna stop [laughs] you know? Yeah, and my uncles started threatening me like saying ‘I’ll tell your family’. I’m like, good luck with that, everyone knows [laughs]. (Syrian interviewee 2)

Meanwhile, in the interviews with Bangladeshis, the family is a prominent and ongoing presence, around which the singles make their choices:

[...] in Bangladesh there is a word [a saying], I mean this word is so much like [what the] religion says, [it is said] that ‘the earlier he marries, the better’. Because [the bachelor] can’t do bad things with other girls, because in Bangladesh they don’t tolerate this thing [...] So the Bangladeshi parent, as soon as [the son] is 23, 24, 25 years old they make him get married (Bangladeshi interviewee 2)

The different impact of family borderwork between the two sets of migrant men points to the different intensity of moral and economic ties with the family. Some of the Syrian interviewees have lost their parents to war, or have seen their families displaced to other countries. The moral authority of these families seems diminished and their abilities to act as border guards between two different moral orders of singlehood are smaller, also because it is unlikely that the families will reunite again soon.

Moreover, Syrians are not part of a transnational household as is the case with Bangladeshis (Gardner & Grillo, 2002), despite maintaining economic ties with the family of origin. Even though the family has often been involved in financing their journey to Sweden, they do not feel strong obligations to repay that expense. Few relatives expect them to actively participate in the household economy. There is a concept of responsible adult masculinity which is widespread in South Asian contexts (Kukreja, 2020). Adhering to that concept, Bangladeshis consider themselves as integral to the economies of the family of origin, and understand their work ethics as a way to fulfill this responsibility.

Only one person [in the family] has a job, and you have to take care of your mother, father, brother … you have to help a bit everyone. (Bangladeshi interviewee 1)

The family is part of steering the Bangladeshi interviewees away from ‘improper’ behaviors through phone calls, remittances and systematic enquiries about lifestyle and acquaintances. An improper way of living as single is associated with an ‘Italian’ (or ‘European’, or ‘Western’) style of masculinity and is defined in terms of hedonism (e.g. dating, drinking alcohol), and individualism (using one’s earnings for oneself). In this context, leaning over into the ‘wrong’ side of this divide, constitutes not only a disruption of a moral order interiorized at a personal level, but also of a series of loyalties within the household.
Syrians also portray individualism as a Western-related notion in contrasts to an ‘Arab’ or ‘Syrian’ family ethos. This portrayal of a less individualist Syrian culture, is likely not as clear-cut in the lives of real Syrian families (cf Inhorn, 2012), although it is possible to write of greater embeddedness of individuals in families in Arab societies compared to the West (Suad, 1993). In many cases Syrians express appreciation for the fact that ‘here’, in their host society, they feel treated as individuals and not as members of a family, and for freedom that they perceive in ‘Swedish culture’:

I appreciate freedom very much, and I think it is great when you can do what you want and choose what you really are and show it. So I appreciate that, and I feel no need to adapt, [but try] to accept others’ liberties when I demand my own, my freedom. (Syrian interviewee 3)

This also points to the class backgrounds of our interviewees (on social class among young Muslim men, see Hopkins, 2006). In general, respondents from Syria come from urban middle class, and in some cases upper class, families. This results in the cost of emigration having lesser impact on the families, and fewer economic expectations on single migrants in terms of remittances and dedication to work. Bangladeshis also come from urban middle-class backgrounds in most cases, but most of them stem from households that, in order to reproduce themselves as middle class, have mobilized all their resources to allow one of their members to migrate. This results in greater expectations and social control of the migrant’s conduct.

In addition, there seems to be less cohesion in the Syrian ‘migrant community’ in Sweden compared to Bangladeshis in Italy. Interviewees talk of avoiding other Syrians, refraining from going to mosques or diasporic organizations. On the contrary, for the Bangladeshis, such community functions as an extension of the household’s social control. The interviewees report socializing primarily with countrymen, and most of them attend Friday prayers and programs organized by Bangladeshi migrant associations. In this way, Bangladeshis experience social control that not only stigmatizes valuing singlehood for itself, but also confirms their identification as ‘household members’.

Community gossip is an important form of discursive borderwork among Bangladeshis. Often a trusted group of bachelors can work as a shelter, where culture-specific ‘problematic’ behaviors like drinking alcohol and buying sex are tacitly admitted. Such topics, however, were only talked about with the researcher when the recorder was switched off:

[…] when I turn off the recorder, he gets overexcited […]. [he] explains that when he has money and free time (lately only the latter) he meets up with his friends, exclusively Bangladeshi bachelors, they buy some ‘fine spirits,’ drink them and ‘go whoring.’ […] I ask if he wants to move to London, he tells me he doesn’t want to go there because he doesn’t want to be around too many people who know him and his family, he wants to be free to do as he pleases. He says he doesn’t like the ‘Bangladeshi community’ in Torpignattara [Rome], because even here, he doesn’t feel free […]. (Ethnographic notes, 22 April 2021)

Syrian interviewees, on the other hand, openly speak of avoiding compatriots. One of the respondents claimed that Arab-speakers in Sweden often share the expression ‘never trust Arabs!’, an attitude that seems geared to put a distance between them and a ‘Syrian’ way of life. Instead, the bachelors have a more cosmopolitan understanding of themselves.
I believe in the values that I could learn from Sweden. So far. Yeah, I avoided to be with Syrian people. Two reasons: first one, that I felt like I really want to push the society, I wanted to feel like a global citizen and - I don’t know if you will understand this the wrong way, but I didn’t want to belong to a place with stereotypes so closely connected to it, or being attached to things that I don’t believe at. I wanted to feel free, free like a bird. (Syrian interviewee 4)

The Syrian interviewees described relationships with compatriots as highly individualized and fractured, demonstrating a lack of diasporic community. This is related not only to a different settlement model (Bangladeshis in Italy developed ‘ethnic enclaves,’ while Syrians in Sweden did not), but also to the different borderscapes in which our interviewees are found. In the case of Bangladeshis, legal and labor insecurity make relationships with compatriots a key asset to survive on the margins of society, Syrians on the other hand enjoy greater autonomy, thanks to long-term residence permits, better placement in the labor market, and the possession of certain skills and dispositions related to their class positionality.

**The borderwork carried out by host country ‘citizens’**

If the borderwork of families and communities is primarily operated by people from the migrant bachelors’ home countries, established majorities in their host countries also engage in the production of vernacularized borders. The theme of the relationship with the majority population brings into sharp focus the role of racialization and social class in the construction and internalization of the borders described by our interviewees.

‘Swedes’ are an important presence in the interviews with Syrians, while ‘Italians’ are more of an implicit theme in the Bangladeshi interviews. The exclusionary borderwork suffered by Syrians is described without reticence by some interviewees.

Women who are not Swedes, they dare to talk to me more often but Swedish girls are more withdrawn from getting to know me and talking to someone who is a migrant like me who does not know the language … so getting to know [female] Arabs is easier. (Syrian interviewee 6)

This quote should be read against the backdrop of the widespread notion of ‘dangerous Middle-Eastern men’ (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Dines, Montagna, & Vacchelli, 2018). There is a growing literature on European fears of men from the Middle East, and it is likely that ideas such as these contribute to the racialized borderwork that the quotation illustrates.

In Italy, visibly Muslim men are also seen through the lens of threatening Islamic masculinity, however, among our interviewees, none wears traditional Muslim clothing. The phenotype of Bangladeshi men is also often not perceived as dangerous, but as effeminate, infantilized, and non-threatening, following a logic also pertaining to migrant bachelors from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Osella & Bristol-Rhys, 2016). Bangladeshis are thus othered, socially and sexually, based on racial stereotypes. Yet the Bangladeshis are reluctant to talk about discrimination. The option of dating or marrying an Italian woman is not even considered by the interviewees, while the difficulties establishing friendships with Italians is attributed to the interviewees’ insufficient language skills.
[...]

It seems paradoxical that the statement just quoted comes from a person who managed a long interview in Italian without problems. One cannot help but think that the exclusion from social and sexual relations with ‘citizens’ is profoundly internalized by many Bangladeshi interviewees, to the degree of blaming themselves for not being able to reach out to the Italians (Hwang, 2021).

With the recorder off, a Bangladeshi interviewee angrily portrays the alienation between Italians and Bangladeshis:

[...]

That the interviewee withheld these views from the ‘official’ interview illustrates the great legal and economic precariousness experienced by many of them. Bangladeshis have more modest social backgrounds and in Italy are relegated to occupational ghettos characterized by great legal insecurity. This makes them unattractive in the eyes of most locals, and the men have little scope to find native friends and partners. The Syrians, on the other hand, in some cases are recognized as peers by Swedish middle-class individuals, by virtue of the work they do and the skills they display, while a certain percentage of Syrians in Sweden were offered permanent residence and were able to have their Syrian academic degrees validated (Universitets- och högskolerådet, 2019).

The interviewed Syrians in Sweden seem to possess a class-related cultural competence that allows them to straddle the border despite the exclusionary effects of the receiving society. One interviewee states that he came to ‘understand Swedish society through [his own] research,’ (Syrian interviewee 6) while many Bangladeshis struggle to describe certain characteristics of Italian society because they admit that they do not ‘know enough about it.’

These circumstances have helped some Syrian interviewees to overcome the barriers separating the established majority from migrants, to date Swedish women or men, and to make friends with people who act as bridges to a different way of life:

So we went to Espresso first, so he got to meet me, and then to feel comfortable, sure, that I’m a good person and so on. Then he started to invite me to his house. We started to go with the dog to the friends. [...] I started to do activities that I like, beside learning the language, talking with them about different things [...] So I was in after six, seven months, I felt part of society I mean. (Syrian interviewee 6)

While more explicitly acknowledging the barriers between them and Swedes, our Syrian interviewees, unlike the Bangladeshis, generally experienced more interaction with locals. They felt at home ‘in the society’, whereas Bangladeshis, who paradoxically downplay the borderwork of Italians, primarily feel part of a ‘migrant community.’

[...] but I still need to learn more. Because we ... we learn the language but not everything ... we learn only what we need and so we don’t speak well, because we don’t have Italian friends to have a chat, half an hour, forty minutes, no. (Bangladeshi interviewee 3)

Hwang, 2021.
The degree of internalization of racism we observed among Bangladeshis seems generally greater compared to Syrians. This does not however mean that Syrian men lack internalized racism. Statements such as ‘never trust the Arabs’ and the distancing to compatriots that we described in the previous section, represent forms of ‘intraethnic othering’ which project stereotypes about Syrian men onto ‘other compatriots’ (Pyke & Dang, 2003). This points to class differences within the ‘ethnic community’ that not only have an fragmentary effect, but make the boundaries between societies more porous. As Lea Ypi (2018) points out, ‘[b]orders have always been […] open for some and closed for others’; in particular ‘[t]hey are open if you are white, educated, and middle and upper class’ (Ypi, 2018, p. 142). In our sample, no one can meet all three preconditions listed by Ypi, but most Syrian respondents meet the last two.

Syrian interviewees in several cases recount that even in Syria it is possible to escape premarital chastity, explaining that they had access to social circuits where they could overcome gender segregation and meet potential partners. Bangladeshis very rarely talk about such venues, and when they do, they usually talk about other people, highlighting their own moral revulsion. While premarital relationships abound among Syrians, significantly, the only two Bangladeshi respondents who spoke of premarital relationships came from relatively affluent urban families. There are examples among Syrians of families that are quite tolerant of premarital relationships (as long as they are heterosexual relationships and especially if they take place abroad). The same is reportedly not true of the Bangladeshis.

This means that the shift between different ways of being single therefore was already possible (and indeed realized by Syrians) in their country of origin, even though in their narratives it is seen as part of migratory displacement. Those from relatively affluent social backgrounds were in fact already inhabiting a way of being single, which they nevertheless describe as ‘European.’ This demonstrates that an alternative to ‘waiting’ already exists in countries of emigration, a fact that relativizes the monolithic culturalist notions used by our interviewees. Our investigation allows us to trace a class divide, rather than culture, as an important factor behind the different notions of singlehood discussed here.

**Conclusion**

Interpreting singlehood as a period of waiting and chastity, as in the case of Bangladeshis, or as a period of experimentation and openness, as in that of Syrians, is the result of complex borderwork that defines structures of (im)possibilities. Both groups speak of a difference in singlehood ‘here’ and ‘there’: a Western or European singlehood versus an Eastern, Asian or Muslim variety. But while Bangladeshis seek to uphold that West vs East distinction, Syrians discuss how they have crossed this racialized border and become more ‘Western’. This difference in outlook must be read in the context of borderscapes that determines each group’s embeddedness in family and community, their relationship to native citizens, as well as their legal statuses. Bangladeshis are deeply embedded in their families and diasporic communities and as ‘migrant workers’, they experience high degrees of precarity and marginalization. Syrians, on the other hand, have families that have often been scattered by war, explicitly avoid the Syrian diaspora and experience comparatively less precarity (at least in relation to work, which, as
refugees, was not a requisite for their residence in Sweden). They also more often report interactions with the established majority population, and feeling part of local society.

The talk of ‘here’ and ‘there’ culturalizes a difference that is often rather constituted through the borderwork of racialization and is mediated by social class. Both Syrians (the gay-identified men somewhat less than the others) and Bangladeshis describe that a more open and experimenting mode of singlehood was possible in their countries of origin. Yet such valuation of openness and freedom was prevalent primarily among the upper middle-classes and upper classes. Different class constellations have meant different borderscapes among migrants. While Syrians spoke of higher education and freedom to choose their own careers, Bangladeshis spoke of economic constraints, the obligation to provide remittances and the need to work. The boundary between different representations and practices of singlehood, between waiting and dating, does not coincide with any simple distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’. Instead, it also runs through sending societies themselves and accounts for different socio-economic positionalities and structures of possibility that shape single life in the European borderscapes. Our analysis suggests that a focus on class and borderscapes can sharpen our understanding of the portability of gender models, including their persistence across cultural landscapes, as well as their transformation.

Note

1. Some of the Syrian respondents (and some compatriots both of the Syrian and Bangladeshi interviewees) are citizens of Sweden, which of course does not prevent citizens by birth from othering them.

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Notes on contributors

Andreas Henriksson is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Karlstad University, Sweden. His dissertation and subsequent research have focused on intimacy and singlehood, but also include forays into masculinity and suicide.

Ulf Mellström is Professor of Gender Studies at the Centre for Gender Studies (CGF) at Karlstad University, Sweden, and Co-Director of the GEXcel International Collegium. Mellström is a leading international scholar in studies of men and masculinities. He is the editor-in-chief of Norma: International Journal for Masculinity Studies and co-editor of the Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies.

Andrea Priori is a Research Associate at the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences at the Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany. His research interests include transnational migrations, migrants’ self-organization, welfare politics, politics of identity and immigration policies, masculinities, racism, bio-politics. Since 2007, he has been carrying out ethnographic research into Bangladeshi migrations toward Italy.
Katarzyna Wojnicka, PhD, is a sociologist and research fellow at the Department of Sociology and Work Science and Centre for European Research at the University of Gothenburg. She is currently involved in several research projects concerning men and masculinities, migration, and social movements in Europe. Before joining the University of Gothenburg, she worked as a postdoctoral researcher at University of Leeds, UK and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin as well as Dissens-Institute for Education and Research and the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) in Berlin, Germany. She has published in journals, such as Men and Masculinities, Social Movements Studies, Evaluation and Planning Studies, International Journal of Qualitative Methods, among others.

ORCID

Andreas Henriksson http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1067-3906
Ulf Mellström http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7235-0179
Andrea Priori http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1318-6137
Katarzyna Wojnicka http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5175-7105

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