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Masculinity in the Sikh Community in Italy and Spain: Expectations and Challenges

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, the Sikh community in India has entered a phase of considerable socioeconomic and demographic transformation that is caused by the large-scale practice of female feticide, the spread of higher education among women, and the mass emigration of unskilled men to the Western countries. These changes have a great impact on the traditional configuration of gender roles and disrupt the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community in India and in the diaspora. Based on ethnographic observations and 64 in-depth interviews with Sikh immigrants in Spain (26) and Italy (22) and their relatives in India (16), this paper first explores the expectations of masculinity in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain; and second, analyses the challenges that are imposed by the socioeconomic and demographic transformation in the Indian Sikh community and the social environment in the host countries on the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community in both countries.

Keywords: Sikh religion; masculinity; gender roles; women's education; diaspora

1. Introduction

While explaining the concept of 'doing gender', [West and Zimmerman \(1987, p. 127\)](#) postulate that "gender . . . is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category". Therefore, for men and women, their gender identity is based on their performance of masculinity and femininity, respectively. Gender is not a biological trait, being fixed and stable, but it can change over time and individually ([Diamond and Butterworth 2008](#)). It is learned through careful observations and imitations of social norms and practices, which are expected from men and women in different social contexts. In several ethno-religious groups, gender has a huge impact on access to opportunities, freedoms, powers, and resources that one can have in a society. Moreover, it affects all important decisions in the life of an individual, especially those that are related to education, job, marriage, and migration. In many traditional societies, migration is highly gender sensitive, since who, how, when, why, and where will migrate, primarily depends on gender identity. Migration creates new challenges and opportunities for migrant men and women by placing them into a new socioeconomic context that often has different gender roles and expectations. The construction of gender identity in a group of immigrants, which has notable cultural differences from the host society and a short time of residence, is influenced by socioeconomic, demographic, cultural, and political changes in their country of origin ([Broughton 2008](#)). The 'Sikh community' is one of the immigrant groups in Italy and Spain, which is trying to construct their gender identity in the midst of socioeconomic and demographic transformation in their homeland.

Sikhism was founded by guru Nanak, the first Sikh guru, at the end of the 15th century and spread by his nine successors. After the death of the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, in 1708, the religious scripture 'Adi Granth' was venerated as an eternal guru. Currently, the Sikh community is the fourth largest religious group in India after the Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. According to the 2011 Indian

census, Sikhism has 20.8 million followers in India, which represents 1.72% of its total population (i.e., 1210 million). In addition, over two million Sikhs live abroad in more than 50 countries around the world, which makes the global Sikh diaspora (Garha and Domingo 2017). Italy and Spain are recent additions to the countries of the Sikh diaspora, where large-scale migration started in the new millennium. Sikh gurus and saints were strong believers of gender equality (Kaur 2010). In principle, it is the only religion in India that allows women to wear turban (which is a symbol of masculinity for upper caste men in Hindu society), carry weapons with them, lead a congregation, and participate in all religious and social activities at any time of their life (Kaur Singh 2005a; Jakobsh 2014). However, despite the efforts made by the Sikh gurus and saints, the Sikh community remained patriarchal, where men had exclusive control over all religious, socioeconomic, and political activities, and women were limited to domestic chores (Kaur Singh 2000; Mahmood and Brady 2000; Jakobsh 2006, 2017). Consequently, even today, it is very difficult to find women in the position of *Granthi* (caretaker of religious scripture) or *Pardhaan* (head of gurudwara (Sikh temples) management committees) in India and in the Sikh diaspora. In many gurudwaras, they are not allowed to perform ministerial duties and enter *Sachkhand* (rest room for religious scripture) (Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016). They are not permitted to perform rites of birth, initiation, marriage, and death. In many Sikh families, being mainly due to the practice of dowry, they are still considered to be a burden on family wealth. Currently, more and more parents have begun to invest in the education of daughters, but they still rarely receive a portion of their ancestral property, although inheritance laws entitle daughters to their fair share of property, due to the small size of Sikh families (two children). Their participation in the labour market, politics, and social life is very limited, which shows that 'the radically uplifting female concepts, symbols, and images permeating the *Guru Granth Sahib* are simply neglected [and] the fundamentally patriarchal culture of the Punjab has continued to reproduce male stream misogynistic interpretations [of the religious scriptures] (Kaur Singh 2005a). These misinterpretations of religious scriptures, given by male priests, resulted in greater control over women in Sikh families and their exclusion from the public sphere. It worked as a very efficient tool for establishing the hegemony of men in Sikh households and society at large during the last three centuries.

Over the past three decades, the Sikh community in India has witnessed three major changes in its socioeconomic and demographic configuration: first, large-scale emigration of poorly educated and unskilled Sikh men from rural areas of Punjab to the South European countries caused by the failure of agriculture and a drastic reduction in the recruitment of Sikh men in the Indian armed services (Khalidi 2001), which were their traditional occupations; second, the shortage of women in the Sikh marriage market due to selective abortions of female fetuses that were facilitated by the inappropriate use of ultrasound technologies in India (Kaur Singh 2008); and finally, the dissemination of women's higher education and their insertion in the labour market.¹ These changes, on the one hand, have left Sikh men without their traditional jobs and, on the other hand, have equipped Sikh women with higher education, which disrupts the power balance between both genders. These unemployed Sikh men, fearing the loss of their status as the breadwinners in the family, began to emigrate to the South European countries (such as Italy and Spain) in search of jobs. However, their poor education and lower skills have created new challenges in their new places of residence. In addition to their weak position in the labour market of the host countries, they are also challenged by more educated Sikh women in their homes, who in the past could not emigrate alone. However, after the completion of their studies, these women are looking for work or higher education in India or abroad. Unlike their mothers or grandmothers, they are neither limited to domestic work, nor completely submissive to male family members. They want to participate in the decision-making process regarding their own lives and other family and social matters. All of these changes have posed new challenges for Sikh

¹ According to 2011 census data, in the age group of 7 to 35 years, the number of women with university education is higher than men (97 thousand more women than men).

men to maintain their authority in their families and society at large and redefine their masculinity in a new socioeconomic and demographic context.

In previous research, the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community has not received significant attention from social scientists. Existing studies have focused on the role of military recruitment (Kohli 2016), land ownership and property (Chopra 2004), caste issues and presence in social media (Gill 2012), and the symbols of Sikh masculinity, such as the turban (Mandair 2005; Kalra 2005; Gill 2014; Chanda and Ford 2010). However, studies on the challenges facing Sikh men in constructing their gender identity in the new countries of the Sikh diaspora, such as Italy and Spain, are scarce (Lum 2016). The main objectives of this paper are: first, to explore the expectations of masculinity in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain, which provides standards for young men to construct their gender identity; second, to analyse the challenges that are posed by socioeconomic and demographic changes in the Sikh community in India for the construction of masculinity in both countries.

The main reasons behind the selection of Italy and Spain as areas of study are: first, these countries are a recent addition to the Sikh diaspora and they have received large-scale immigration of Sikh men since 1990 (Garha and Domingo 2017). These men are going through a period of socioeconomic and demographic transition of the Sikh community in India that is having a significant impact on their construction of masculinity. Secondly, the majority of Sikh immigrants in both countries belong to the first or one and a half generation (Garha and Paparusso 2018), who have less economic and social capital, which, in turn, makes them more vulnerable to changes in their country of origin when compared to Sikh men in other major destinations of the Sikh diaspora, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the US. Finally, due to their short stay in host countries, they present researchers with an excellent opportunity to study how Sikh men adapt or resist to their new context where gender equality is an important concern in all spheres of life.

2. Masculinity as a Social Construct

In previous studies, masculinity is widely described as socially and historically constructed phenomenon, rather than a result of genetic or biological differences between men and women (Clatterbaugh 1990; MacInnes 1998; Whitehead and Barrett 2001; Hibbins and Pease 2009; Jackson and Scott 2010). In other words, it is better understood what men do or are supposed to do, and then what they are (Kimmel 1994). According to Connell (2005a), masculinity only exists in contrast to femininity, so it does not exist in a culture that lacks a prescribed set of roles for men and women. It “consists of those behaviours languages and practices existing in specific cultural and organizational locations that are commonly associated with males and, thus, culturally defined as not feminine” (Itulua-Abumere 2013, p. 42). Men and women are constantly pressured to act according to the role prescribed to them because gender roles are predefined by society. Therefore, for men denying all other behaviours and practices that are considered as effeminate becomes an essential part of their gender construction. The level of masculinity depends on upbringing, family background, schools, the labour market, socioeconomic status, and culture, in which boys learn the male role through observation and feedback and become men (Edley and Wetherell 1995).

In American society ‘marketplace masculinity’, which is based on the ability of men to buy tangible goods, is used as a standard definition of manhood against which other forms are measured (Kimmel 1994, p. 124). It leaves many other groups with limited purchasing power, such as poor men, blacks, and women, in a subordinate position. Recently, the concept of neoliberal masculinity (Cornwall et al. 2016) highlights the constant struggle of men to accumulate and maintain their market value through self-exploitation. In relation to the Sikh community, Connell’s theoretical framework (Connell 1987, 2005a) on gender is very important, since it integrates the concepts of ‘patriarchy’ and ‘masculinity’ into the theory of gender relations, which are the most important characteristics of the Sikh community. Her concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which relies on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, asserts that hegemonic masculinity is “constructed in relation to several subordinate masculinities, as well as in relation to women” (Connell 1987, p. 183). It is the most socially sanctioned

form of masculinity that subordinates other types, and it functions as the standard of masculinity that men follow and identify with psychologically (Ibid.). In this theory, the most important aspect is the hierarchical nature of masculinities that reinforces domination both within and between genders. Different historical periods had a certain type of hierarchical set up of masculinities in all human societies, according to [Connell \(2005b\)](#). In the colonial period, the imperial powers had created a masculinity scale to classify their subject groups into masculine ‘martial races’, such as the Sikhs, Rajputs, and Gorkhas, and effeminate groups, such as Bengalis ([Sinha 1995](#)).

Some scholars have criticised the dualism of hegemonic/subordinate masculinities to explain the complexity of gender power relations. In his article, [Demetriou \(2001\)](#) introduced the notion of “hegemonic masculine bloc” to eliminate this dualism. He suggests that a form of masculinity that is capable of reproducing patriarchy is in a constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration. It implies that hegemonic masculinity is capable of transforming to adapt to the specificities of new historical conjunctures. He stresses that “the hegemonic bloc changes in a very deceptive and unrecognizable way through the negotiation, appropriation, translation, and transformation of what appears counter-hegemonic and progressive into an instrument of backwardness and patriarchal reproduction” ([Demetriou 2001](#), p. 355). Later, [Connell and Messerschmidt \(2005\)](#) reformulated the concept of hegemonic masculinity by “incorporating a more holistic grasp of gender hierarchy that recognizes the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of hegemonic groups and that appreciates the mutual conditioning (intersectionality) of gender with such other social dynamics as class, race, age, sexuality, and nation” (as cited in [Messerschmidt 2012](#), p. 59). In recent research, some authors described hegemonic masculinity as “a set of values established by men in power that functions to include and exclude and to organize society in gender unequal ways, which combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities differential access among men to power (over women and other men) and the interplay between men’s identity, men’s ideals, interactions power and patriarchy” ([Jewkes et al. 2015](#), p. 113). Although hegemonic masculinity is the most idealized and desired type of masculinity, it is not available to all men ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)). Men who enjoy hegemonic masculinity are also more prone to the crisis of masculinity with the loss of the breadwinner’s role and their status in the family ([Coward 1999](#)). In this sense, [Connell \(2005a\)](#), p. 54) states “masculinity becomes vulnerable when for whatever reason gender performance breaks down”. This breakdown of gender roles often results in the emergence to toxic masculinities ([Sculos 2017](#)) that use aggression, dominance, and violence as tools to maintain hegemony of men in the family and society. Despite its criticism, the reformulated concept of hegemonic masculinity ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)) offers a solid theoretical framework for understanding the nature, form, and dynamics of male power in the Sikh community, which is affected by caste and class differences.

Migration, as a global process, affects the construction of gender identities by changing the socioeconomic environment of the people involved ([Hugo 2000](#); [Parreñas 2005](#); [Ye 2014](#)). In their study of Kerala men, [Filipo Osella and Caroline Osella](#) illustrate how migration and the failure of migrant men to meet dominant social expectations impact their gender identity ([Osella and Osella 2000](#)). Similarly, [Gardner \(1995\)](#) highlights how the wealth earned and remitted by migrant men from Bangladesh contributes to the construction of their identity as ‘men’. In general, migrants try to make a balance between the gender orders of their homeland and that of the host countries. They negotiate their gender identity according to their social context, which makes them susceptible to socioeconomic and demographic changes at both ends of their migration process (see [Broughton 2008](#) for Mexican migrants). Therefore, it is imperative to take into account changes in countries of origin and destination to study the ways in which gender identities are redefined in the new countries of residence ([Gutmann 2003](#)). In some recent studies, scholars have discovered that how the entrance of migrant women in the labour market and their assumption of the role of the main breadwinners of their families, disarticulate the ways in which men used to construct their masculine identity in the past ([Parreñas 2001](#); [Gamburd 2002](#)).

In the Sikh community, masculinity also known as *mardangi* in Hindi/Punjabi, is directly related to men's ability to meet their household needs, and have control over women. As [Connell \(2005b\)](#) claims that each historical period and society have a certain hierarchical configuration of masculinities, the upper-caste *Jatt* Sikh men, who still own a large part of the land and property in Punjab, represent the standard hegemonic masculinity in the Sikh community. The manhood of a *Jatt* man in Punjab is measured through his ability to plough the land and his influence in the social and political spheres ([Chopra 2004](#)). The turban, which is an important symbol of religious and cultural identity of Sikhs ([Chanda and Ford 2010](#)), is also a symbol of pride and manhood for the upper-caste Sikh men. In this paper, I will focus on how Sikh men construct their gender identity in Italy and Spain, where they immigrated in search of livelihoods and to make a space for them as men.

3. Data Source and Methodology

Fieldwork for this paper was carried out over a period of three years (2015–2018). The ethnographic research method, where the researchers observe and interact with the participants of a study in their real-life environment, was applied to gather information on the expectations of masculinity and the challenges facing Sikh men in the construction of their gender identity in Italy and Spain. In addition, 64 in-depth interviews were conducted with Sikh immigrants in Spain (26 interviews in January to September 2016) and Italy (22 interviews in January to April 2017) and some of their relatives (parents, spouses, or children) in the Indian Punjab (16 interviews in December 2017 to January 2018). The interviews were conducted in seven cities in Italy (Brescia, Rome, and Latina) and Spain (Barcelona, Girona, Valencia, and Murcia), which has a considerable number of Sikh immigrants. In India, interviews were conducted in Kapurthala, Jalandhar, and Hoshiarpur districts in the Doaba region of Punjab, which is the homeland of most Sikhs living in Italy and Spain.

Respondents in Italy and Spain were selected while using the snowball sampling technique and matched-sampling method was used to select respondents in India. For those interviewed in Italy and Spain, the eligibility criterion was that a person must be a Sikh, over 16 years of age and live permanently in either of these two countries. In India, the respondents were close relatives of the immigrants in Spain or Italy. In the total respondents, 42 were men and 22 women, which corresponds to the sex ratio of the Sikh community in both countries. The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire. The immigrant respondents were asked to express themselves on the following topics: family history, migration process, main causes of migration, life in the country of destination, attitude towards gender roles, current socioeconomic condition, and future perspectives. The relatives of immigrants interviewed in India were asked to explain their role in the migration process and the consequences of immigration on their lives. The interviews were conducted at the respondent's place of residence in one of the following languages: Punjabi or English, thus making the interview as convenient as possible for the respondents. For a thematic analysis ([Boyatzis 1998](#)), all of the interviews were coded in the Atlas.ti computer programme. After transcribing the interviews, following the steps mentioned by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) for the thematic analysis, the topics that were highlighted by the respondents were searched and coded with some initial codes. Subsequently, the families of the initial codes were formed to classify information related to a topic in one place of all interviews. This prepared the primary data for analysis. Subsequently, patterns and themes related to the construction of gender identity were sought in all interviews. Several quotations were selected to present different views on the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain.

4. Sikh Masculinity in Italy and Spain

The pioneer Sikhs entered Italy during World War II as the British Imperial army ([Bedi 2011](#)), but their large-scale immigration began in the 1990s ([Garha and Domingo 2019](#)). In this influx, a large number of young men with little education and skills entered Italy in search of manual jobs, regularisation, and opportunities for permanent settlement. It established Italy as an important destination in the Sikh diaspora. In 2018, after the United Kingdom, Italy had the highest number of Sikhs in Europe. The sex-ratio (males per female) of the Sikh population has always been in favour of

men due to the predominance of men in the total influx. Most Sikh women entered Italy with family visas, as wives or daughters of the immigrants. The Sikhs are mainly concentrated in Lombardy and Lazio regions of Italy. In Lombardy, the province of Brescia, Bergamo, and Mantua are their main destinations, while, in the Lazio region, they are concentrated in the provinces of Rome and Latina (Garha 2019). Their main occupations are dairy farming, agriculture, and manual labour in small-scale food processing, leather, and metal industry (Sahai and Lum 2013).

In Spain, the first Sikhs entered in the late 1970s (Santos-Fraile 2013), but their numbers were relatively small and concentrated in the La Rioja region of Spain (López-Sala 2013). A large-scale influx of young unskilled and poorly educated Sikh men to Spain began in the late 1990s. According to the National Statistical Institute (INE), in 2018, the size of the Sikh population in Spain was 26,200, of which two-thirds were men of working age. They settled along with the Mediterranean coast of Spain. Currently, the autonomous community of Catalonia has half of the total Sikh population in Spain. It also has 10 of the total 21 gurudwaras (Sikh temples) in Spain (Garha and Domingo 2017). After Catalonia, the autonomous communities of Valencia, Murcia, and the Balearic Islands have a considerable number of Sikhs. They are mainly engaged in the catering, agriculture, and construction sectors and they have a very low socioeconomic profile (Garha and Domingo 2019).

When compared to other destinations in the Sikh diaspora (such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States) that attract high skilled workers or students, Italy and Spain are new destination countries for low skilled Sikh emigrants from middle-class farmer families, who can pay money for irregular entries through tourist visas. In both countries, the Sikh community is highly masculinized and they have a very low level of integration into the host societies due to the remarkable cultural differences (language, religion and education) with the host population and lower education (Garha and Papparusso 2018).

Expectations of Masculinity in the Sikh Community in Italy and Spain

As each society has its unique set of gender roles and expectations from different gender identities, before studying the challenges for the construction of masculinity, it is imperative to explore what it means 'to be a man' or 'expectations of masculinity' in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain. Currently, most Sikh men in both countries were born and raised in India. Their early life in the rural areas of Punjab, where the social structure is highly patriarchal, has a very strong impact on their ideas regarding gender roles, and the position of men and women in society. During my regular visits to Sikh temples and the time I spent with Sikh families in Italy and Spain, I gathered opinions of Sikh men of different age groups (from 20 to 60 years) regarding their perception of a "real man". With a detailed analysis of interviews and field notes, I discovered that Sikh men in both countries construct and measure their masculinity on the bases of four factors: physical and psychological strength, moral character, economic and political power, and the degree of control over women. First, masculinity is seen as being directly related to the physical strength of men. Tall and muscular men are considered to be more masculine when compared to others (short, fat, slim, or disabled men). These others are always mocked because of their physical appearance, and struggle to construct their masculinity. In this sense, Harman, 24, a student in Brescia, says that "strong, muscular and tall men always gain more respect compared to slim, short and fat men, who are often bullied by others". In addition, physical appearance is considered a very important aspect of normative Sikh identity due to the dominance of the Khalsa tradition. The long beard, moustaches, and turban are considered to be essential masculine traits for all Sikh men. The clean shaved men are often categorised as effeminate or less masculine. As Gurnaam, 56, a member of gurudwara committee in Barcelona, says that "men with turban and beard are complete men. All others [clean shaved men] are like sheep and goats, they should not be called as men". The demonstration of physical strength through participation in combat sports, such as wrestling and Kabaddi, and some risky behaviours, such as getting into bodily fights with other men, driving fast, and overworking, are also considered to be manly attributes. The growing interest among young Sikh men in Italy and Spain to participate in annual Kabaddi tournaments and spend time bodybuilding are clear examples of their awareness of their physical appearance, which is

an important element of their masculinity. In addition to physical strength, Sikh men are also expected to be psychologically stable and less expressive. While describing the characteristics of an ideal man, Major, 34, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, says that “real men do not cry for small things and accept life’s challenges with a smile. They keep their promises and do not hesitate to die for their honour”. Showing weak emotions in public is forbidden for Sikh men, as it can jeopardize their status as ‘strong men’ in the family and society.

Second, in the Sikh community, high moral character is considered to be an essential masculine characteristic. Sikh men are expected to have qualities, such as truthfulness, honesty, kindness, fidelity, faithfulness to their religion, and respect for others. Sikh history and folk music glorify the warriors and saints, who had demonstrated high levels of morality. In his interview, Harnam, 35, an agriculture worker in Murcia, Spain, explains that “real men have faith in god and do not cheat anyone. They are kind and helpful to others”. Sikh religion strictly prohibits men from having intimate relationships before marriage. Instead, all men are encouraged to marry Sikh women of adequate age and remain faithful to her throughout their lives. In this regard, Jeet, 32, a factory worker in Rome, states that “real men always remain faithful to their partner. They treat all other women as mothers, sisters, or daughters. Throughout our history, Sikh warriors have sacrificed their own lives while saving the lives and honour of women from other communities”. The high moral standards of Sikh masculinity, on the one hand, do not allow promiscuous behaviour in the community and, on the other hand, promotes endogamy as an essential characteristic of real men. It is one of the main reasons behind the dependence of Sikh men on their homeland marriage market for their marriages and the low number of mixed marriages in the Sikh community in both countries.

Third, as in the Sikh community, all men are expected to assume the role of breadwinner, being active in the labour market is an important feature of masculinity (see marketplace masculinity by [Kimmel 1994](#)). Most Sikh men emigrate to assume the role of provider for their families due to the lack of opportunities in India. In fact, for them, ‘emigration’ is a way to demonstrate their manliness. An easy adaptability in harsh working conditions and a willingness to perform all of the tasks entrusted by employers are highly valued masculine traits in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain. Malkit, 36, an agriculture worker in Latina, states that “real men do all jobs offered to them. They do not cry doing hard-work”. Some Sikh men believe that ‘money’ is a very important factor in earning respect in society. For them, their main duty is to earn money with a respectful work, which helps them to prove their worth in the family and society. Gurjit, 32, a construction worker in Barcelona, affirms that “If you do not have money, big house and luxury cars, nobody respects you in the society. A man is valued by what he owns”. Others believe that for a man to spend money on friends or doing charity for social or religious causes is as important as taking care of his own family. Sikh men are expected to be generous with others, regardless of their religion, caste, and colour. Self-centred men are always classified as less manly than others. Kamal, 33, a truck-driver in Madrid, says that “money is not something important for real men. It comes and goes, but real men do not lose their character in difficult situations”. The ability to have a large social circle is also considered to be a manly trait. An active social life and participation in community affairs stand out as essential characteristics of Sikh men. Therefore, they invest a lot of time and resources in expanding their social networks. In Italy and Spain, the wide social network not only translates into high social status, but also provides support in search for employment and accommodation and facilitates the process of regularisation in host countries. Kuldeep, 28, a shop worker in Valencia, affirms that “the power of a man can only be measured through his social circle. Real men like to have a large social circle that supports them to gain power in society and politics”.

The fourth important factor in measuring the level of masculinity is the degree of control over women. In general, Sikh men are expected to have some control over women (wife, sisters, and daughters) in the family and society. In almost all Sikh families, men assume the role of the head of family, due to the strong patriarchal structure of the Sikh community and the early migration of men in Italy and Spain. They feel that this is their legitimate right and that women must respect their decisions

5. Major Challenges Facing Sikh Men in Italy and Spain

In the Sikh community, all men are expected to remain active in the labour market and provide resources for their families due to the prevalence of the male-breadwinner model. For centuries, agriculture has been the main occupation for Sikh men in India. Traditionally, Sikh men have used their abilities to plough the land and produce food in large quantities to demonstrate their manliness in society. In the 1960s, the government of India began a pilot project called 'Green Revolution' in Punjab. Agricultural production increased remarkably and Punjab became the bread-basket of India due to the mechanization of agriculture and the use of new high-yielding varieties of seeds and chemical fertilizers (Dutta 2012). The rampant commercialization of agriculture and exclusive land-ownership rights accumulated economic powers in the hands of men and strengthened the patriarchal structure of Sikh society. However, at the same time, the mechanization of agriculture reduced its dependence on muscle power, which left large numbers of unemployed youth.

After agriculture, the second main occupation of Sikh men in Punjab was to serve in the armed forces. With the creation of the Khalsa in 1699, the glorification of men as brave soldiers promoted a hyper-masculine culture in Punjab (Kaur Singh 2005). Later, under colonial rule, the categorisation of the Sikhs as a "martial race" and their recruitment into the British imperial army in a disproportionately large numbers strengthened patriarchy in the Sikh society (Kaur Singh 2005a). The pride that was associated with the position of a soldier and the good income received in the form of land or cash provided the basic ingredients for the construction of traditional Sikh masculinity for many generations of Sikh men. The dominance of Sikh men in the Indian armed forces remained until the 1980s, but, after the battle of succession in Punjab, the recruitment of Sikh men in the armed forces was drastically reduced. It left a large number of Sikh men without their traditional jobs. In addition, the political crisis exacerbated economic conditions in Punjab and no investments were made to create employment opportunities in the state (Ghuman 2012). At the same time, the neoliberal shift in Indian economic policies in the 1990s destroyed the public education system and vocational training centres in Punjab (Kumar 2008, 2016), which deprived the youth of higher education and good health services.

The failure of agriculture, the lower recruitment in the armed forces, and the lack of infrastructure (education and vocational training facilities) led to the creation of a pool of unskilled and poorly educated young men who were not eligible for the government jobs in India or professional jobs abroad. Therefore, most of these unskilled men began to emigrate to the Western countries to assume the role of bread-winner expected from them. Ranjit, 38, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, explains:

"I was born in a Sikh family. My grandfather was a farmer in a small village on the banks of the Beas river in the Kapurthala district of Indian Punjab. He had the largest share of land in the village. He was very proud of his ability to plough the land and feed the family of 16 members, including his own 9 children. He was the supreme authority in the family and due to his strong personality, intelligence, hardworking and generous nature, he had earned a lot of respect (*Izzat*) in society. People used to call him *Sardar Ji* and for many he was a perfect model of 'what a man ought to be'. My grandmother was a housewife. She was fully dedicated to the service of her husband and the care of children ... My father, at the age of 20, was recruited in the Indian army to serve the nation in the 1971 battle with Pakistan. With his strong physique, good command over military weapons and acts of bravery in war, he earned respect as a brave soldier in the army and in society at large. In addition, with the salary received as a government employee, he managed to assume the role of breadwinner of the family. My mother is a housewife. She spent her entire life serving her husband, in-laws family and then taking care of her 4 children ... I, as the first grandson of a proud farmer and the eldest son of a brave soldier, grew up in the shadow of two very dominant men, who were very proud of their achievements in life. In my early childhood, I was taught to be bold, courageous, protective and provider. When I turned 20, the mechanization of agriculture had reduced employment opportunities in the village, and due to the *Khalistani* movement in

Punjab in 1984, the recruitment of Sikhs into the Indian army was at its lowest level. I had few opportunities to prove my worth in the family, therefore, in 2004, I emigrated to Spain to earn a living and a space in society as a ‘man’”.

This is not a rare case, rather it is a repeated story in many interviews and speaks of the challenges facing Sikh men in India to construct their masculinity. They are desperate to emigrate from Punjab, as they understand this to be an opportunity to prove their worth to their families and to establish themselves as providers. Even in the South European countries, they are denied legal access and work permits due to less demand for unskilled labour. Therefore, most of them emigrate illegally, paying huge sums of money to human traffickers and enter countries where the process of regularisation is relatively easier, such as Spain and Italy as compared to other European countries (Garha and Domingo 2017). The dangers that are involved in illegal migration are also seen as opportunities for young Sikh men to show their courage. Balkar, 47, father of an irregular immigrant, states that “when irregular immigrants return to India after regularising their legal status, they tell their stories of illegal emigration with great pride to show their courage and manliness, and to earn respect of their parents, younger siblings, and friends”. This has promoted a new form of neoliberal masculinity in the Sikh community that encourages young men to risk their lives and properties to satisfy the requirement of being active in the labour market.

In Italy and Spain, the life of irregular immigrants is full of hardships, where irregular immigrants cannot work in the formal labour market and have no social protection at the time of unemployment or illness. The difficult journeys undertaken by Sikh men to enter Europe do not help them improve their market value and demonstrate their worth in the family through remittances. This adds to their previous difficulties and generates a huge psychological stress regarding the construction of their gender identity. As Tarlok, 29, an irregular immigrant in Latina, says “I do not have papers and work. I cannot remit money to my family. I feel very depressed because my wife has to work in India to feed our son. I am not fulfilling my duty as head of the family”. Due to the restrictions in the labour market, most irregular Sikh men have no other choice than to work in the shadow economy for their survival. The lack of labour contracts, which safeguard the rights of workers in European countries, make them vulnerable to exploitation by their employers who pay them low wages and treat them as slaves. Young Sikh men that are trapped in these working conditions lose their self-esteem and sometimes end up feeling helpless and depressed. Manreet, 29, a farm worker in Brescia, explains: “We have no money or respect in the host society. Employers here treat us like slaves because they know we do not have papers [legal work and residence permit]. It gives us a sense of impotency”. This sense of helplessness often results in drug/alcohol abuse, which further produces elements of toxic masculinity in the Sikh community. Even after the regularisation of their legal status, they remain occupationally segregated in some poorly paid jobs in the agriculture and service sectors due to their limited skills and knowledge of the host languages (Italian or Spanish) and segmented nature of host labour markets. This affects their financial stability and upward social mobility, considered to be essential elements for the construction of Sikh masculinity.

The factors that are central to the construction of traditional Sikh masculinity in India (i.e., land ownership, luxurious homes, upper caste, and job in the armed services), lose their importance in Italy and Spain. Especially, the upper caste Jatt Sikh men who have enjoyed a high social status and represent the hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) in the Indian Sikh community, feel the burden of proving themselves in this new context, where they lack their social and economic capital. As Jagjit, 27, a farm worker in Latina, explained that: “In Punjab, we were landowners. The workers from Bihar and UP used to work on our fields. We had respect in the society. Here we work under ill-mannered managers, who treat us like slaves. It damages our self-esteem”. The turban and long beard, which are the important symbols of masculinity in India, have also lost their importance in Italy and Spain. Here, young Sikh men hesitate to wear a turban as they believe that it will reduce their chances of getting jobs in restaurants and sales sectors, which are their main occupations in the host countries. Manpreet, 24, a restaurant worker in Valencia, affirms that “In Spain, it is very difficult

for a Sikh man with a turban and beard to get a job in the service sector. Restaurant employers do not hire people with long hairs or beard”.

In summary, the irregular legal status, the low level of education and skills, the lack of social and economic capital, the poor working conditions in the host labour markets, and the restrictions on the symbols of Sikh masculinity are negatively affecting young Sikh men, who are constructing their gender identity in Italy and Spain. They live in the nostalgic memories of their past life in the rural areas of Punjab, where they were landowners and had high socioeconomic status in society.

5.1. Losing Control over Women

Over the past three decades, the shortage of women in the reproductive age groups and the spread of higher education among women has begun to change the position and aspiration of Sikh women in India and abroad. The Sikh community has begun to witness a shortage of women in the marital and reproductive age groups due to the preference of the male child and the widespread practice of selective abortion of female foetuses (Purewal 2010). According to the 2011 India census, the sex-ratio of the Sikh population was 110.7 men per 100 women. Men outnumbered women in all age groups and the greatest difference was in the age group of 0 to 6 years, i.e., 121 boys for 100 girls. It was far from the overall sex-ratio (around 105 boys for 100 girls) within other religious communities in India. The second major social change in the Sikh community is the growing number of women with higher education. In traditional Sikh society, girls were not allowed to have higher education and they were encouraged to learn domestic work. Therefore, it was easy for men to control their lives and impose their decisions on them. However, with the expansion of higher education among women and their insertion in the labour market, women within traditional Sikh society are insisting on their right to choose their own futures. This desire to become independent sometimes clashes with the interests of men (husband, father, or brothers) in the family, who in the name of family honour expect the total submission of women (wife, daughter, or sister) to their authority. This empowerment of women has posed new challenges for Sikh men (husbands, fathers, or brothers), who do not want to give up their privileges and struggle to construct their masculinity in a new social context where gender equality is protected by the law and highly valued in all spheres of life.

5.1.1. Challenges for Partners

In the new destinations of the Sikh diaspora, such as Italy and Spain, where the influx of migrants is mainly made up of single men, most of them depend on the marriage market in Punjab to search for their partner. The number of mixed-marriages is very small due to their low socioeconomic status in the host countries, expected endogamy, and the restrictions imposed by religion (the Sikh code of conduct prohibits marriages with non-Sikhs). The shortage of women in marital and reproductive age groups and the growing interest of women in marrying men settled in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom have exacerbated the situation for Sikh men in Italy and Spain². As Gural, 27, a farm worker in Latina, Italy, explained “In Punjab, most women want to marry men who are settled in Canada, the United Kingdom, or the United States of America. Sikh men in Italy, Spain, Portugal, or Greece have no value in Sikh marriage market”. For Sikh men, who have undertaken dangerous journeys to enter Europe and worked hard to establish themselves in Europe, rejection in the marriage market of their community is a matter of shame. They are afraid of being left behind, which affects their self-esteem. Jeevan, 29, a factory worker in Rome, explains “For the past three years, my family could not find a suitable bride for me. When they tell girl’s parent that I live in Italy, they refuse. I am afraid I will die ‘Shada’ [a derogatory term for a single man]”.

² In addition to the better economic condition and the English language, this interest is also driven by the fact that it creates the possibilities of migration of other family members, such as siblings and spouse’s parents (see Mooney 2006).

Even when they manage to marry a girl in Punjab, they struggle, as they face the reality of more educated and non-submissive partner. The education gap with their wives makes them insecure about their position as head of household, which they perceive as an attack on their masculinity. In this sense, Gagandeep, 34, a farm worker in Latina, says that “now in Punjab girls are very demanding. They do not listen to their in-laws and if the husband says something, they threaten him with divorce. The day is not far when men have to follow the orders of their wives, as they do in Europe or Americas”. The more educated wives do not hesitate to remind them about their low education and demand participation in all family decisions. Most of the men married to more educated women advise others to avoid marrying a more educated woman than themselves. Harjinder, 31, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, says that “I advise all single men not to marry a ‘Master’ girl [with a Master’s degree]. It is better to remain single than to marry them. They treat their husbands like crap and make them feel inferior throughout their lives”.

Similarly, the entry of women into the labour market has also changed the balance of power between men and women in Sikh households in Italy and Spain. Working women have begun to demand their rights to leisure and the participation of men in domestic and reproductive work, which often creates domestic conflicts. Most Sikh men find it embarrassing to do housework when their wives work outside. They take it as a direct attack on their masculinity. Even when some of them do take part in domestic work, they are afraid of being labelled as less manly by their friends and family. Kulbir, 38, a salesman in Rome, explains that “my wife works in a gift shop. I do all the domestic work when she is away. But in our community, if you do domestic work people make fun of you. So I don’t tell anyone about this, not even to my parents because they have a very traditional thinking”.

In the Sikh community, men usually migrate first and then bring their wives, but, in some cases, girls who have emigrated with their parents also reunite with their husbands from India. The Sikh men who emigrate after marrying a Sikh woman in Italy or Spain feel enormous stress to prove their manliness. Traditionally, it is considered to be shameful for a man to live in his spouse’s house. Therefore, after arriving Italy or Spain, getting a permanent job and renting an apartment become the main tasks for sponsored husbands. Newly arrived Sikh men find it difficult to find good jobs and rent apartments in the host countries due to cultural and language differences. Additionally, if the wife is working outside of the home, these men are expected to do domestic work, which hurts their manhood. Tarinder, 29, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, explains that “I immigrated with a family visa to join my wife in Spain. Initially, it was very difficult to adapt to this new situation ... I used to avoid Sikh people because they often see me with disrespect ... Now I have a decent job and a beautiful apartment. Now I feel comfortable with my male ego”.

5.1.2. Challenges for Parents

In the Sikh community, the honour of the family is the most important thing and the responsibility for keeping it high rests with the women (Viridi 2012). They are often considered to be the jewels of the ‘turban’ of their father and brothers, the turban being a symbol of masculinity in Indian society. During the last decade, the attitude of Sikh parents in India and abroad has changed with respect to the education of their daughters and their access to the labour market. Currently, most of them are proud to send their daughters to universities and professional colleges for higher education and vocational training, instead of saving money to pay the dowry at the time of their wedding. For fathers, the respect earned in society by giving a huge amount of dowry in the past has been replaced by the pride earned in the form of daughters who managed to obtain a university degree or a position in the labour market. Kirpal, 48, a shop owner in Madrid, says that “My daughter has completed a nursing course. Now she can have a permanent job at a local hospital. I am very proud of her. As a father, I have done my duty”. The dissemination of higher education has changed the opinion of young women regarding the gender roles that are expected from them. They have begun to demand their rights and participation in decisions that are related to their lives. In this situation, the same fathers who have

spent resources to educate their daughters and make them independent feel deceived by their desire to take control of their lives. Mukhtiar, 47, a construction worker in Barcelona, expressed concerns as “I sent my daughters for higher education. As a father I have done my job. But now it’s up to them to maintain my respect in society. If they do not follow my decisions now, then it will be a punishment for a father who supported his daughters”. It is common to find fathers who struggle to cope with these issues and, in turn, blame modernization or social-media for spoiling their daughters.

The growing educational gap between Sikh men and women in India has posed a new challenge of having equally educated matches in the community. As the number of highly educated women is growing faster than men, it has become very difficult for their parents to find suitable spouses for them within the community. In his interview, Gurmukh, 49, a construction worker in Barcelona, explained “I have two daughters with university degrees. Both are in the age of marriage. I am looking for good matches in our community, but it is very difficult to find well-educated men in the Sikh community. I am worried about their future”. Parents often feel compelled to marry their daughters to less educated men, which sometimes create generational and class conflicts. The daughters who resist parent’s decisions regarding their marriage often receive severe punishments. In extreme cases, it also results in forced marriages or honour killings, which are registered in India and other countries of the Sikh diaspora (Deol 2014). No such cases have yet been registered in Italy and Spain.

Cohabitation is not allowed in the Sikh community for both sexes, but the rules are much more rigid for women than for men. Therefore, one can find Sikh men who live with European or Latin American women, but it is very difficult to find Sikh women who live in cohabitation relationships. For Sikh fathers, it is a disgrace if their daughters leave home to live with someone outside of marriage, even if he is a Sikh. Gurlal, 54, a businessman in Barcelona, expressed his opinion about living together as “If a girl leaves her family to enter into a living together relationship, it is a shame for the whole family. No Sikh father will allow this to happen”. In Spain and Italy, the institution of marriage is losing its importance and the number of cohabitating couples is growing rapidly. Young Sikh girls who are in schools and universities, witness this transformation in the host society. At times, they long for the same freedoms that are entirely unacceptable to their fathers (and families in general). This, in turn, might lead to generational conflicts and even domestic violence.

Control over women also includes control over sisters by elder or younger brothers. For Sikh men, any disrespect toward their sisters is a direct attack on their masculinity. They do everything possible to ensure the safety and well-being of their sisters, which at times translates into excessive control over their freedom to eat or drink whatever they want, dress as they want, and be in the company of a person they like. This excessive control often creates frictions between brothers and sisters regarding their freedoms to live their lives as they wish. Many brothers in Italy and Spain claim that any act of their sisters, which is considered to be inappropriate for a girl in the Sikh community, will profoundly damage their respect and position as men in society. Simran, 28, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, says that “If your sister does inappropriate things, such as drinking alcohol, wearing short cloths, or spend time with guys at night parties, you have all rights to punish her, even if she is elder than you. As a man, it’s your responsibility to have control”.

In Italy and Spain, challenged by their wives, daughters, or sisters, who have their own wishes and plans about their lives, and the protection granted by the laws of the host countries against any kind of aggression, these husbands, fathers, and brothers struggle to live with their new realities that clash with their ideas about their own gender identity and the desired hegemonic masculinity.

6. Conclusions

Gender has always been a very complex issue in the Sikh community. For the past three centuries, contrary to the teachings of the Sikh religion, the Sikh society remained patriarchal, where men had full control over social, economic, and political affairs and women were limited to domestic chores. The traditional occupations of Sikh men in agriculture and armed services and misogynistic social norms and practices prevalent in the broader Indian society, facilitated the reproduction and strengthening of

the patriarchal structure of Sikh society. It helped Sikh men to construct their masculinity as protectors and providers for their families. The centrality of upper caste men in the public sphere, their exclusive control over resources, and control over women become essential ingredients for the construction of hegemonic Sikh masculinity.

In the last two decades, the loss of traditional occupations and the fear of losing the breadwinner's role have expelled Sikh men from rural India to South European countries, such as Italy and Spain. In addition to the labour force, they have also brought their ideas about gender roles and the expected form of traditional Sikh masculinity to their new destinations. They have very high expectations of masculinity, which stem from the folkloric history of the Sikhs and they represent an idealised form of real man in the Indian context, one who is physically and psychologically strong, economically well-off, dominant, highly moral, and heterosexual. Sikh men in Italy and Spain aspire to have all these traits, but, due to their low skills, irregular status, and lack of social and economic capital, struggle to construct their desired form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Rather, the self-exploitation of Sikh men to earn money working in harsh conditions bring on elements of neoliberal masculinity (Cornwall et al. 2016) in the Sikh community, which encourages young Sikh men to risk their lives on dangerous journeys to irregularly enter Europe.

In addition to the challenges in the economic sphere, the traditional configuration of gender roles has been challenged due to the shortage of women in marital and reproductive age groups and the dissemination of higher education for women in the Sikh community in India. Men have started losing control over women. More educated Sikh women do not want to marry less educated men in Italy and Spain, which leaves a large number of Sikh men with no chance of getting a bride in the Sikh community. This rejection in the marriage market harms their self-respect. They feel uncomfortable with their more educated wives, even if they manage to marry a girl with higher level of education than their own. These wives do not hesitate to contradict them when it comes to their rights and freedoms. The fear of being rejected in the marriage market and marrying a woman with more education generates anxiety among Sikh men regarding their position in the family and construction of their desired form masculinity. As parents, Sikh men have begun to support their daughters to get higher education, but they still struggle to give them total freedom to choose their partners and lifestyles of their own choice. This fear and insecurity at times manifests itself in the form of excessive control, aggression, and domestic violence, which creates the elements of toxic masculinity (Sculos 2017) in the Sikh community in both countries.

The Sikh community has been in Italy and Spain for a relatively short time span. Most Sikh men belong to the first generation and their ideas about gender roles are more influenced by their home society, which is highly patriarchal. Their attempts to maintain total authority in the family often leads to domestic violence and generational conflicts, which is not a healthy sign for any human society. Now the time has come when Sikh men in Italy and Spain have to rethink their perception of masculinity, shedding the toxic elements, including aggression, dominance, and control, and renouncing their full authority in their family and social spaces. In their new socioeconomic context, they have to negotiate their position in their families and in society on more equal terms (as suggested by Demetriou 2001). In this regard, Sikh men that are born and educated in Italy and Spain, who are more exposed to the host society (in which gender equality is fully respected), can play an important role in creating an egalitarian Sikh society, dreamed of and preached about by all Sikh gurus centuries ago.

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