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Between Cultural Expectations and Personal Choices: Marriage Attitudes of Central Asian Women

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study explores the evolving attitudes of marriage among Central Asian women living in the United Kingdom. Drawing on a social constructionist framework and employing reflexive thematic analysis, interviews with five single women from Central Asia reveal how migration, education, and exposure to new cultural environments shape their perceptions of marriage. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: the tension between cultural expectations and personal agency, and the negotiation of marriage as a choice shaped by lived experiences, gender norms, and structural constraints. These findings demonstrate a shift toward autonomy and critical reflection, whilst demonstrating a persistence of traditional pressures and patriarchal values. This study provides an in-depth appreciation of how gender, culture, and identity intersect in shaping marriage perceptions among diasporic youth and offers further insight that will inform future research and culturally informed support initiatives.

Keywords: Attitudes towards marriage; Arranged marriage; Culture; Gender norms; Thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Attitudes towards marriage and the idea of marriage itself are rarely formed in isolation. Culture, familial narratives, and broader social norms shape them. In Central Asia (CA) in particular, the concept of marriage transcends mere personal choice and represents a whole notion of a collective phenomenon, such as obligation, a marker of adulthood, and a source of social cohesion and autonomy. Yet, when women migrate and encounter other cultural frameworks and meanings of marriage, particularly in Western contexts, their initial attitudes may come into question. This qualitative study aims to explore how CA women, living in the UK, navigate the space between this cultural legacy and emerging personal choices. While Central Asia is culturally diverse, this paper focuses on women from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, with participants representing both settled and nomadic ethnic backgrounds. The findings should therefore be understood as illustrative of transnational experiences rather than as generalizable claims about Central Asia as a whole.

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The findings argue that, although marriage in CA contexts is often structured by patriarchal expectations, women abroad actively negotiate these constraints rather than reproduce them. Building on feminist scholarship that conceptualizes agency as situated and relational—most notably Kandiyoti's [1] notion of "bargaining with patriarchy"—this study demonstrates how women reimagine marriage as a space of choice, delay, or renegotiation. In doing so, the findings contribute to regional debates on gender and marriage by foregrounding women's narratives and highlighting how transnational mobility enables new forms of agency without denying the enduring power of social norms rooted in the region.

The UK was selected as the research context because it represents a sociocultural environment in which marriage is commonly framed as an individual choice grounded in personal autonomy, emotional compatibility, and self-fulfilment. Compared to many CA contexts, the UK is characterized by greater social acceptance of delayed marriage, cohabitation, non-marital partnerships, and women's educational and economic independence. This contrast provides a particularly relevant setting for examining how migration reshapes marital meanings, as CA women are exposed to alternative relational norms that may challenge collectivist expectations tied to family authority, respectability, and gendered life-course trajectories. Rather than positioning the UK as universally representative of "Western" contexts, this study treats it as a liberal–individualist contrast case that allows for closer examination of how marital attitudes are renegotiated through transnational mobility and cultural comparison.

1.1. Defining Marriage

Definitions of marriage have a liquid form and transform depending on purpose and cultural context. Scholars have approached the study of marriage from cultural, economic, and gendered dimensions, viewing it as a social practice, rather than just a personal choice [2–6]. To gain clarity, for the purposes of this study, sociological, anthropological, and legal definitions will be used to assess the principle of marriage. According to Giddens [7], marriage functions as a union, sustained by mutual satisfaction and agreement of both partners. Giddens focuses on the 'pure relationship' aspect of marriage, suggesting that such relationships are characterized by greater equality and foster ongoing communication and harmonization between the partners. This definition highlights the main purpose and essence of marriage, however, it overlooks other important factors, such as variations in cultural and functional characteristics of marriage. However, Leach [8] challenges the sociological definition, introducing instead the various objectives of marriage across different cultures. He suggests that marriage can: establish legal parentage, grant rights of sexual access to a spouse, allocate labor and property, as well as create social or political bonds between the kin groups. Leach argues that due to the abundance of practices bundled under the term 'marriage' and the lack of overlap between them, it is hard to formulate a general definition. Moreover, Leach aims the question not at interpretation, but at the objective of marriage in specific cultural settings. Finally, the legal definition of marriage considers the legal properties, highlighting the rights and obligations recognized by the state. For instance, marriage establishes inheritance rights, various financial entitlements and arrangements, and appropriate next-of-kin status. As much as marriage is a private agreement, in terms of statutory regulations, it is also a determinant of public legal status.

The legal definition of marriage allows for the place of marriage in the legislative field, nevertheless, the laws and regulations facilitating marital processes are also dependent on the norms of individual countries. Therefore, following Leach's position, this study will focus on what marriage does to the parties and societies involved. This perspective becomes particularly relevant in the context of CA, where marriage plays a central role in structuring not only personal lives but broader social relations. For instance, Cleuziou and McBrien [9] suggest that marriage is understood as a fundamental institution that profoundly shapes individual lives and social interactions. Supported by Lorber's framework [10], marriage becomes a key platform through which the social concept of gender is enacted and maintained, shaping the ways in which women are taught to think, behave, and imagine their futures. These gendered expectations are not only

internalized by individuals but are also actively enforced by culture through family structures, where kinship and marriage decisions reflect broader ideas about proper femininity and social duty [11].

1.2. Influence of Culture on Marriage

It is evident that culture serves as a backbone to many expectations and guidelines around marriage. Drawing on Bernheim's [12] theory of conformity and Markus and Kitayama's [13] theory of self-construal, marriage in CA can be seen as part of a collectivist orientation in which individuals are expected to align personal goals with communal well-being and family honor. In this context, honor refers to a moralized perception of a woman's character, encompassing ideals such as fidelity, modesty, and marital status, which collectively determine a family's social standing [14]. This cultural framing, amplified in collectivist societies, positions successful marriage as a strategic social act with consequences for one's broader social standing, emphasizing the influence of women in determining a family's status. Hui and Triandis [15] argue that individuals from collectivist cultures are more likely to conform to prevailing norms to maintain group cohesion and avoid social disapproval. Within its role as a social instrument, marriage is essentially a family affair. Thus, family involvement is at the core of CA marriages, and it follows almost every step of the process, including the choice of a spouse or the decision to divorce. These choices are intimately linked to a family's reputation and influence within the community, reinforcing marriage as a relational and moral responsibility. In their analysis, Cleuziou and McBrien [9] highlight three main frameworks through which marriage is enacted in CA: religious (*nikoh*), civil (*ZAGS* or *Zapis' aktov grazhdanskogo sostoianiia*), and communal (*tuy*). Performance of each of these acts is situational and depends on the family arrangements, nevertheless, this signifies that the concept of marriage is very complex as it has endured historical and legal changes in the CA region.

1.3. Evolution of Marriage in CA

To gain a clearer understanding of the evolution of marriage in CA, it is important to identify the key milestones that have shaped the ways in which marriage was established, practiced, and regulated. Some considerations about how patriarchy looks in the context must be explored. In the Central Asian context, patriarchy refers to socially and culturally embedded gendered norms that regulate women's roles within family and society, while simultaneously allowing strategic negotiation of opportunities for personal and social agency [11,16]. Before the revolutionary movement of Soviet Russia reached the CA region, the marriage guidelines were governed by a pluralistic system that relied on *sharia* customs for settled Muslim communities and *adat* for nomadic populations [17]. These systems emphasized marriage as a social and economic transaction, where a woman's agency was limited or entirely absent. In both systems, marriage functioned primarily as a family-arranged transaction and involved practices such as payments to the bride's family (*kalym*) and to the bride herself (*mahr*), with marriage often being arranged without the bride's consent. The process prioritized alliances between families over personal compatibility or romantic partnership. Polygamy was commonly practiced and permitted under both legal traditions, and husbands held near-total authority over their wives. In certain contexts, young women could even be transferred as compensation between clans, highlighting the deeply patriarchal and commodified nature of marriage at the time.

Soviet authorities have tried to dismantle this system by banning people's courts that had previously settled religious and customary cases [17]. This move was not only administrative but ideological—by eliminating customary institutions, the state cleared the way to impose its own legal framework and redefine the foundations of family life. In an attempt to reshape societal norms, Soviet authorities implemented a series of legal reforms aimed at transforming traditional marriage practices across CA. These reforms sought to cancel customary marital traditions that were violating women's liberty according to Soviet

Russia's norms [18]. This mission echoed earlier Russian colonial rhetoric, in which CA women were framed as passive victims of Islamic patriarchy in need of rescue through unveiling and exposure [19]. Yet as Zekhni [19] argues, these so-called civilizing missions often relied on orientalist assumptions that sexualized and objectified Muslim women while ignoring or reproducing structural violence, rather than producing any substantial positive outcomes. Soviet interventions often failed to challenge the underlying patriarchal structures and instead imposed new forms of control. Kalym, polygamy, forced, and underage marriages were criminalized. Penalties included fines and prison sentences, such as one to five years of imprisonment for marrying more than one wife or for coercing a woman to marry. Additionally, the legal minimum age for marriage was raised from nine years old, as permitted under Sharia, to sixteen or seventeen under Soviet law. Civil marriages were now required to be registered through the official registry (*ZAGS*), and previously existing unions were to be legally formalized.

1.4. Aftermath of the Soviet Influence

The top-down nature of Soviet legal reforms often failed to account for deeply rooted cultural norms, which led many communities to reject or creatively evade new laws. In practice, the reforms introduced numerous legal and social complications, especially in cases such as polygamous unions, where men were expected to choose one wife to remain with, often leaving others vulnerable to social stigma or poverty [18]. The payment of *kalym* continued but was reframed, to avoid legal scrutiny, as "gifts" to the bride's family for raising their daughter. Underage marriages proceeded with the help of false documents from corrupted or cajoled doctors and ZAGS officials. Moreover, legal marriage registrations were often faked or avoided, while religious weddings or *nikah* happened without state oversight. Despite the Soviet party's attempts to enforce reform and liberate Muslim women in CA, polygamy and traditional power were persistent. Those women who took the courage to unveil or join the Soviet movement were confronted with transgressive violence—over 2500 women murdered during that period. In practice, the gap between law and enforcement meant that women's rights remained precarious. Many women were still married off young, denied the ability to divorce, or pressured into accepting polygamous unions. Even those who embraced the new legal protection often faced adverse and malicious reactions from their communities. These challenges were not simply the result of poor enforcement or local resistance but were rooted in deeply held collective convictions. Gender roles and marital norms were embedded in broader social values that extended beyond individual choices, shaping how both men and women navigated the new legal system.

While Soviet and post-Soviet laws sought to individualize marriage, the weight of social expectations and family authority continues to govern marital choices in much of CA. In this context, the endurance of traditional practices such as *toy* and *nikoh* reflects more than just cultural continuity; it highlights how marriage operates as a public performance of social relevance and family honor. Families would often invest heavily in them to maintain or improve their reputation [17]. Lavish ceremonies and obedience to religious rituals were often used as ways of affirming a family's moral standing, economic stability, and social reliability within the community. Therefore, despite the evident inequality in rights and authority, many women, especially mothers, supported or enforced traditional norms. These entrenched patterns of behavior can be better understood through Judith Butler's [20] theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not a stable identity, but rather a set of repeated actions that are socially regulated and maintained through discourse and performance. In the context of CA, these repeated acts represent a gateway through which femininity is publicly affirmed. Mothers encouraged practices such as early marriage, modest behavior, or strategic matchmaking not because they were unaware of their limitations, but because they saw these as practical pathways that ensured respectability and security for their children.

These cases suggest that traditions were not merely blindly inherited, but rather consciously mobilized for practical matters [21]. *Nikoh*, for example, even after its embargo, maintained the prevalence and remained essential in affirming the legitimacy and social acceptability of a union. Rather than disappearing

under modern legal systems, these traditions have been repurposed to serve evolving social needs—demonstrating the enduring power of family reputation and social visibility in CA marriage practices. Young women, as future brides and bearers of family reputation, are often socialized from an early age to embody the family's ideals of modesty, respectability, and duty. Their roles are tightly imposed within the broader scripts of moral behavior and family honor, making deviation difficult and costly—a point tragically exemplified by the repercussions faced by unveiled women and followers of the Soviet reforms. Thus, gender performativity demonstrates why reforms alone could not dismantle traditional power dynamics, as gender itself was being repeatedly performed, affirmed, and policed through marriage and family structures. Yet, within the rapidly changing world and increasing globalization, these traditional roles are being challenged—and, in some cases, strategically reinterpreted by women navigating new economic and legal freedoms and cultural landscapes.

1.5. Beyond Tradition: New Horizons for Women

The post-independence period in CA has produced uneven developments in women's legal empowerment across the region. Some countries have expanded legal protections and criminalized domestic violence, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, however, enforcement gaps and persistent patriarchal attitudes continue to limit the influence of these legal measures [22]. The same pattern can be detected in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where initiatives towards gender equality have been introduced, nevertheless, many women still navigate a landscape shaped by traditional expectations of modesty, motherhood, and family loyalty. The legal frameworks exist across CA. Yet, the lived experience of women reveals a gap between rights on paper and in practice. Traditions often override state law, particularly in rural areas, making it difficult for legal reforms to lead to meaningful structural or cultural change. Alongside legal developments, globalization plays an increasingly significant role in reshaping what is considered possible and permissible, as women navigate the tension between personal aspirations and cultural obligations.

Other legal changes, such as labor mobility, together with increased access to global media and mobile technologies, have exposed young women to other models of lifestyle (romantic love, cohabitation, delayed marriage, and female autonomy), in contrast with the inherited cultural values. Cleuziou and McBrien [9] note that labor migration has empowered some women to delay marriage in favor of gaining financial independence abroad; nonetheless, this chance often exists in tension with their communities' expectations of modesty and early marriage. Roche et al. [23] depict informal female financial networks and entrepreneurship opportunities as sites of economic empowerment, as well as spaces for balancing their ambitions with performative traditionalism, as in remaining "modest", "respectable", and "marriageable" despite the independence. In rural settings and diasporas, migration often intensifies family superintendence and the desire to preserve cultural authenticity. Kazakhstan is one of the few examples that suggest that cultural and economic shifts alter how and when people marry, in spite of a strong economic upturn [24]. The formation of formal unions continues to decline, signaling that globalization may be unbinding marriage from its traditional timeline and functions. Altogether, this leads to an ongoing negotiation between personal choice and cultural expectation, leading either to economic self-dependence and agency or to remaining constrained to deep-seated communal values. This does not necessarily create a clear break from tradition, but rather a hybrid scene, where traditions are preferentially preserved, reconsidered, or opposed in the context of ever changing social and economic realities.

1.6. Persistent Structural and Psychosocial Challenges

Gender inequality, patriarchal systems, and violence towards women are subsequent factors that define the boundaries of women's choices in CA. Gendered expectations are often reinforced through familial,

religious, and community structures. They limit women's autonomy over their bodies, finances, and futures. Cleuziou and McBrien [9] suggest that marriage functions as a cultural ritual as well as a means of control over female self-expression. Domestic violence and emotional coercion often occur in traditional marriages, with many women being legally constrained to their partners and lacking meaningful access to legal or financial independence.

Connell and Messerschmidt [25] explain these dynamics through the theory of hegemonic masculinity, which suggests that certain dominant forms of masculinity are upheld as ideals, while other masculinities are pushed to the margins. In CA, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced through certain expectations: a man should lead the family, control important decisions, be financially dominant, maintain honor and tradition, and, more often, suppress emotional vulnerability. These norms are upheld not just by male populations but often by entire kinship systems—thus, controlling not just women, but also controlling what kind of man is acceptable; thereby helping patriarchy maintain itself. This theory helps understand men's attempts to reassert dominance through controlling marriage decisions, considering the continuous destabilization of traditional male roles. Indeed, the topic of divorce is still practically omitted, especially in rural areas, due to stigma and economic vulnerability. Marriage in this context can act as a gatekeeping mechanism, allowing patriarchal societies to monitor women through the symbolic and material weight of marital status. Borneman [26] sees marriage as a mechanism of social legitimacy that defines good, respectable, and proper women from bad, shameful, and deviant ones. Such unreasonable unions become prevalent in times of uncertainty, when state institutions are transforming, and private life becomes more exposed to moral and public policing. These structures actively produce meaning, thus limiting freedom. They dictate the rules of behavior, occupation, and penalty for violating them. Marriage thus serves as a mechanism of social control, reinforcing patriarchal boundaries through the moral categorization of women.

While social and structural expectations limit women's autonomy, the development of commitment in marriage further complicates women's decision-making. As outlined by Stanley and Markman [27], commitment can be divided into personal dedication, perceived as a genuine desire to maintain and nurture the relationship, and constraint commitment, which refers to the external or internal pressures that make leaving a relationship difficult, regardless of satisfaction. In the context of CA, constraint-based commitment appears to dominate, as women often remain in marriages due to economic dependency, social stigma, or fear of dishonoring their families. Personal and structural investments such as childrearing, caregiving roles, and cohabitation with in-laws reinforce this dynamic [28]. Moreover, long-term views of marriage, commonly internalized by CA women, may lead them to endure hardship with the belief that sacrifices, which are expected more from women than men, are necessary for family cohesion and reputation [29]. This unequal expectation of sacrifice aligns with broader gender hierarchies, where emotional and practical investments by women rarely lead to equal gains in autonomy or power, which is often associated with unhappy relationships and poor emotional well-being [30]. Thus, commitment, often romanticized [31], becomes another mechanism through which patriarchal norms are reproduced in the form of loyalty or tradition.

1.7. The Interplay of Tradition and Emerging Autonomy

Despite legal progress and growing individual agency, marriage in CA continues to operate as a deeply layered, strategic, symbolic, and identity-defining institution. According to Cleuziou [32] and Trevisani [33], the topic of marriage needs to be understood as far more than a romantic or familial institution—it is a highly negotiated social transaction that secures material stability, kinship ties, and symbolic belonging. Marriage in CA is often seen as a marker of adulthood and respectability [34], giving a woman social recognition within her family and community. Her marriage ties her personal future with the family's social capital and the community's moral expectations [35]. Turaeva [36] further emphasizes that women often find ways to strategically navigate these pressures and balance conformity with resistance. Given the

economic and legal dimensions of marital unions, marriage can also serve as an important avenue for accessing legitimacy, resources, and social protection [11,37].

Nevertheless, this legitimacy comes with a price, as women are expected to perform heteronormative and patriarchal gender roles [20]. From a psychological standpoint, the enduring social weight of marriage in CA can be linked to interdependent self-construal, where one's identity is shaped through social roles and relationships, rather than personal autonomy [13]. These cultural expectations are cultivated at key developmental stages, described in Erikson's theory of psychosocial development [38], particularly during adolescence and early adulthood, when identity is often integrated through socially approved events such as marriage, as seen in Kyrgyz virginity ceremonies and marital customs that signal the transition into adulthood [34]. Therefore, a woman's sense of self is shaped within these social and cultural constraints, as family and community norms guide her decisions and define acceptable roles [29]. However, as Stuart Hall [39] argues, identity is not fixed—cultural identity is an evolving process and not a permanent state. In this light, CA women do not passively inherit marital roles, but they often reinterpret them and use them as a tool within these identity-building processes within family and social structures [1].

Turaeva [36] documents multiple cases with women who leveraged divorce, business success, or alternative marital arrangements to pursue autonomy in their lives. Their choices reflect how they reconfigure womanhood within the limits and possibilities of their social landscapes. The intersection of tradition, gender norms, and socio-economic pressures makes up the framework of CA marriage, turning it into a valuable social tool for constructing the objective social reality of women. Cleuziou [32] suggests that the social meaning of marriage persists even when it dissolves or falls short of its idealized perspectives. Women can redefine respectability through "strategic remarrying" or even maintaining the appearance of being married when they are not.

Perceptions of marriage and family structure have been changing in the Westernized world. A study by Karna et al. [40] highlights that opinions of Canadian millennials on marriage lean towards more pragmatic and egalitarian approaches, suggesting that personal growth, autonomy, and financial security are a priority. This signifies a global shift in favor of individualism, gender equality and relationship flexibility. Although increasing globalization contributes to these trends, in more traditionalistic and collectivistic societies, this shift does not lead to distinct changes but rather to an unfolding process that combines individualistic and collectivistic perceptions. For instance, in India, where the concept of family is still at the center of its society, modernization does not directly influence intentions to marry across the population, indicating that the value of family and marriage extends the global and modernizing ambitions [41]. Yeung and Jones [42] further analyze the changing marriage dimensions throughout the Asian continent. They propose that access to education and personal development does contribute to more liberal lifestyles and views on marriage among female populations; nevertheless, the degree of this contribution varies greatly by individual countries. Contributing to these insights, Sonkaya and Öcal [43] demonstrate that women's adherence to traditional gender roles and uncertainty regarding their domestic position can negatively impact their views on marriage. By applying Social Identity Theory [44], Sonkaya and Öcal [43] suggest that individuals internalize the gender roles of their cultural group through social identification. Therefore, increased socioeconomic independence and awareness of emotional labour within relationships correspond to more negative marriage perceptions, indicating women's dissatisfaction with unequal relational expectations. Another study done by Sadeghian et al. [45] contributes to the understanding of evolving marriage perceptions. Their qualitative study on marriage perceptions among married Iranian students provides support to the notion that even in traditionalistic and religious environments, modern marital ideals increasingly emphasize emotional intimacy, mutual respect, and gender equality. These global patterns reflect broader shifts in how marriage is conceptualized, particularly among younger, more educated populations. However, within CA, where marriage is embedded in collectivist norms, kinship structures, and gendered moral economies, marital status continues to structure women's social legitimacy,

respectability, and access to resources. Ethnographic research across the region [11,29,34] demonstrates that marriage is not merely a personal or romantic institution but a key site through which honor, authority, and gender hierarchy are negotiated and reproduced.

At the same time, feminist scholarship cautions against portraying CA women as passive subjects of patriarchal domination, emphasizing instead how women actively navigate, comply with, and strategically reinterpret marital expectations within constrained social systems [16]. Against this backdrop, the negotiation of evolving marital ideals—shaped by education, migration, and global exposure—remains complex. These tensions motivate the present study, stemming from the main researcher's own situatedness and lived experience, as a young CA woman living abroad, aiming to understand, experience, and navigate marriage in ways that both reflect inherited gendered norms and actively reshape them.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the attitudes and thoughts of women from CA countries towards marriage while living abroad. A qualitative approach was considered particularly appropriate given the study's focus on subjective meanings, identity negotiation, and psychosocial processes surrounding marriage. The design is underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, which states that perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and meanings are affected and formed through social interactions and cultural context [46]. Social constructionism argues that the meaning of marriage is not inherent or universally fixed but rather is dependent on the ways in which individuals interpret and produce their own meaning through meaningful experiences in social and cultural structures. This framework is especially appropriate for exploring marriage attitudes among CA women, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of how gender roles, family expectations, and cultural identity are shaped and reshaped across time, space, and social relationships.

Braun and Clarke's [47] reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to analyze the data. This method allows for a flexible and systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across the qualitative dataset. The method supports both descriptive and interpretive engagement with participants' narratives, enabling analysis of explicit content alongside underlying assumptions, emotional positioning, and culturally embedded meanings. Its reflexive orientation emphasizes the active role of the researcher in knowledge production and encourages ongoing critical reflection throughout the analytic process. This approach was particularly appropriate for examining how participants' understandings of marriage shift in relation to migration, gender norms, and changing social expectations.

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, using social media platforms (primarily Instagram) and diaspora community spaces to connect with CA women living in the UK. The Inclusion criteria required participants to:

(a) be over 18 years old; (b) identify as female; (c) be born in a Central Asian country or identify with a Central Asian nationality or ethnicity; (d) be single and without children; (e) have lived in the UK for a minimum of two years; and (f) not be currently diagnosed with a mental health condition.

These criteria were used to reduce potential confounding influences related to parenthood or acute mental health distress, and to focus on women navigating marriage expectations prior to motherhood.

Five participants were recruited, originating from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. All participants were single women without children at the time of the study. While the sample size was small, it is consistent with qualitative research aimed at depth rather than representativeness. The study does not seek to generalize findings to all CA women; instead, it offers an in-depth exploration of how a specific

group of women living abroad understand and negotiate marriage within intersecting cultural frameworks. Recruitment was further facilitated by the researcher's own background and connections with the community. The small sample size aligns with an interpretive qualitative approach, where analytical richness and depth take precedence over representativeness. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study seeks analytical insight into how CA women living abroad construct and negotiate meanings of marriage. This small-N design enables close attention to individual trajectories and psychosocial processes, which would likely be obscured in larger-scale designs, and is consistent with qualitative designs [48].

2.3. Procedure and Data Collection

Each participant was provided with an information sheet and a consent form. After receiving signed consent forms, a convenient date and time for interviewing were selected with each participant. The one-to-one online interviews were conducted using the Microsoft Teams platform. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The recordings were confidentially and securely password protected in the OneCloud account in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). A time frame of 40 to 60 min was allocated for the interviews. The participants were allowed to withdraw from the study without consent at any given time. During every interview, the researcher asked prompting questions along with the main interview questions to encourage the participants to elaborate on their answers to collect rich and in-depth data. After interview completion, the participants were sent debriefing forms and informed about the next steps of the study.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

This study obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent's University London. This study was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct [49], ensuring that participants' dignity, autonomy, and well-being were protected at all stages.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussions surrounding marriage, gender expectations, and family pressure, care was taken to create a supportive interview environment. Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or terminate the interview at any point. All identifying information was anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

3. Results

The analysis identified two overarching themes and five subthemes that reflected the participants' perspectives and experiences relating to marriage. These themes capture patterns of how young CA women navigate cultural expectations, personal values, and their evolving attitudes toward marriage in the context of migration. The analysis of themes and subthemes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
Attempting to balance others' expectations *vs*. my own regarding marriage	Pressure to tie the knot The interplay between myself and outgroup members Me, myself, and I: In the front row
Over 18 but off-the-market!	Rationale behind marriage Better safe than married

3.1. Attempting to Balance Others' Expectations vs. My Own Regarding Marriage

All participants reported experiencing pressure to marry, whether from immediate family members, extended relatives, or the broader community. This theme explores how participants experience tension between external pressures (family, society, culture) and their internal values or desires. It captures the

psychological negotiation between conforming to cultural expectations and asserting individuality in relation to marriage.

Although participants originated from three CA countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan), the study was not designed to conduct country-level comparisons. Given the small sample size and the study's interpretive focus, analysis centered on shared and divergent meaning-making processes related to marriage, migration, and identity rather than on national differences. Where relevant, contextual distinctions are noted cautiously; however, the primary analytic goal was to explore how CA women living in the UK negotiate marital expectations across cultural contexts, rather than to attribute attitudes to specific national backgrounds.

3.1.1. Pressure to Tie the Knot

This subtheme reflects how participants are directly and indirectly encouraged to marry by relatives and broader social circles. It also includes culturally prescribed expectations around marriage timing, gender roles, and arranged unions. Several participants described being persistently questioned by parents, aunts, and extended kin about their marital status, often framed as a duty to the family or as a necessary step within expected cultural roles. For instance, one participant reflected: "*The only pressure I get is probably from my mom, who really wants me to get married*". Another participant described the emotional weight of growing up in a traditional environment: "*When everyone you know, all your friends, cousins back home are getting married, having kids, and you are so far from that. You feel like there's something expected of you*".

Unlike direct family pressure, societal expectations can be more diffuse, yet equally powerful, creating an ambient sense that marriage is the expected and respectable path for women. Many participants reported feeling peer pressure, attention from male acquaintances, or unsolicited advances from matchmakers. As participants described: "*I get a bit of peer pressure*"; "*If you get a guy friend, he'll eventually ask you to marry*"; "*When you turn 18, matchmaker starts calling your parents and stuff, and this is a bit irritating and creepy*". These experiences suggest that marriage is not only a family concern but a deeply normalized social milestone, reinforced by both casual interactions and more formalized community practices. Beyond creating general pressure to marry, societal expectations also define how and when marriage should occur.

This subtheme also illustrates the norms, customs, and responsibilities that are frequently linked to marriage in CA contexts. All the participants described how these norms were directly and indirectly affecting their lives and marriage expectations. Many participants emphasized the gendered nature of these cultural obligations, noting that women are expected to adhere to specific roles and behaviors within marriage.

Participants reported encountering stereotypical assumptions regarding the appropriate timing for marriage. There was a shared perception that women should marry within a socially acceptable age window, typically by their early twenties. One of the participants states: "*As a Central Asian, it's normal for our people to be married by this age*". Such norms reinforced feelings of urgency and the association between age, respectability, and marital success.

Marriage itself was expected to happen early, and arranged marriages remained common. As one participant expressed: "*In Uzbekistan, we have a lot of arranged marriages*". Together, these cultural expectations shaped participants' views on how, when, and with whom marriage should occur, often prioritizing social respectability over personal choice.

3.1.2. The Interplay Between Outgroup Members and Me

This subtheme captures how participants balance personal values and external cultural influences. Rather than rejecting marriage altogether, many women described a process of selectively integrating aspects from both their CA upbringing and their current environment.

A preference for personal freedom and individual choice over cultural demands and expectations surrounding marriage was expressed. For instance, one participant affirmed: "*I'll be into self-development*", while another reflected: "*Once I'm done with university, I will definitely think about it more*". Several participants also emphasized prioritizing liberty and self-expression over adherence to cultural expectations. As such, one participant stated: "*When you're alone, you're able to do everything that you want to*", and another added: "*I would say culture became less and less prominent in my opinions of marriage. It is still a part of me, but it doesn't influence myself, my personality and my choices*". These choices around autonomy and self-development also shaped the participants' expectations for future partners. One participant reported: "*Because you're already a developed, made-up woman, you wouldn't go for a guy who has attachment issues, or doesn't have enough education to provide you with something*". This shift illustrates how personal security, comfort, and long-term compatibility are becoming more prominent priorities in shaping marriage decisions.

The ideal marriage was described as a blend of cultural familiarity and liberal values. One participant reflected: "*I take the masculine part from Uzbekistan and then the liberal part from Europe*". Others highlighted the importance of cultural continuity within marriage, stating: "*I love our culture. And I want to keep that going with my kids, my partner*" Family connections were also seen as vital, with one participant stating: "*I want their parents to have a relationship with my parents*". Sharing the same background and cultural ideals was another important factor in choosing a partner, as one participant expressed: "*My partner should feel like home and home is how you grew up. I want my partner to be with the same background and it's something I came to recently*".

When discussing their specific needs in marriage, participants emphasized emotional safety, mutual understanding, and shared values. Qualities such as openness, empathy, and the ability to express oneself freely were highlighted as critical. As one participant summarized: "*It's all about friendship, about understanding each other, and just compromising, being empathetic*". Marriage, in this view, is envisioned not as a social duty but as a meaningful partnership that supports both personal and shared growth.

3.1.3. Me, Myself, and I: In the Front Row

This subtheme highlights how migration, education, and exposure to Western societies influence participants' independence and marriage attitudes. Many describe a shift in identity and self-awareness resulting from these experiences. Participants reflected on how migrating abroad, particularly to Western countries such as the UK, reshaped their views on marriage, independence, and gender roles. Living outside of CA exposed them to alternative models of partnership and selfhood, sometimes fostering more individualized attitudes toward marriage and relationships.

Experiences in Western contexts challenged existing negative associations with marriage. Participants described egalitarian or emotionally supportive partnerships around them, reshaping their perceptions. One participant shared: "*When I first came here, I lived with a landlord and landlady. So, my perception of marriage changed because I saw how people can live happily*". Another participant reflected on the negative connotations certain household chores had for her and how this changed through her migration experience: "*You learn about the fact that maybe in my future I actually want to live with someone. Cause I want to cook together with someone, and cooking is not the wrong thing as I thought it was in Uzbekistan*".

Some participants reported witnessing supportive and loving marriages within their families, which shaped optimistic views about marriage. One participant shared: "*I see how my dad treats my mother and their interactions*", while another noted: "*My sister got married to a family, I saw the perception of a happy family, happy marriage*". These experiences provided a hopeful illustration of what marriage could represent. However, participants also described instances of growing up around marriages that were representing conflict, lack of communication, and emotional distance, which shaped more cautious or critical attitudes towards marriage, especially traditional one. One participant reflected: "*My parents'*

marriage has been an arranged marriage. So, I don't really have a happy childhood because of that". Others pointed to broader social patterns that are evident in closer community circles and news in the media. The same participant continued: "*And on top of that, I used to see the news and my neighbors and my friends, families having experienced the same issues as in my family. People not understanding each other, not communicating, blaming each other*", while the other supported: "*In Uzbekistan, there are a lot of stories of divorce that have happened because of the mother-in-law*". Another participant reflected on their thoughts on the reason as to why these incidents might occur: "*You know, it's true about generational trauma. They [parents] were given the same trauma, and they unconsciously do the same to you*". Observations of peers' experiences, such as early marriage and rapid divorce among young friends, further reinforced concerns about the sustainability of traditional marital practices.

3.2. Over 18 but Off-the-Market!

This theme explores how participants make sense of marriage, considering their personal values, cultural backgrounds, and lived realities. It highlights both the ideals they hold and the concerns that influence their choices.

3.2.1. Rationale Behind Marriage

Diverse views about marriage were evident, ranging from cultural loyalty to liberal ideals to ambivalence. They describe their choices as strategic and influenced by family history, observed marriages, or pragmatic values. For some participants, cultural continuity remained significant in selecting a partner. They expressed a preference for getting married to someone from the same background, emphasizing the accent on shared values, family traditions, and parental involvement. As one participant shared: "*I would personally prefer to have someone from my culture*", and another supported the idea of following traditions: "*In recent years, even months, I supported it (arranged marriage) more than before. I understand it more now*". Trust in parental judgement and an appreciation of family supervision were also highlighted: "*It's important that I trust my parents, I trust that they look more deeply into a person's family, where they came from, all of that. Your parents think about your future*". On the other hand, participants leaned more towards liberal ideas of marriage, prioritizing friendship, personal enjoyment, and autonomy. They emphasized the importance of living independently from the extended family and building partnerships based on mutual respect and pleasure: "*I wouldn't want to live with my in-laws*" and "*So, my idea of marriage is marrying your best friend*".

3.2.2. Better Safe than Married

Gendered norms and systemic inequalities persist in shaping women's experiences, both culturally and within marriages. These inequalities limit women's autonomy, reinforce traditional power dynamics, and normalize harmful practices across generations. Growing up as girls in CA societies, participants reported being socialized into rigid expectations about femininity and marriageability. One participant reflected: "*Because in our culture, growing up as a girl is difficult. It's like, 'You have to learn how to clean up... you have to learn how to cook because one day you're going to be a bride'*". Others highlighted the pervasive social surveillance of women's behavior: "*They take it as, 'Would she be a good wife', based on how you talk, dress, and walk*". Participants also noted the pressure to prioritize marriage over education or careers: "*Oh, you need to get married. You don't have to work. A career is not for girls*". The onset of adulthood was particularly gendered, with marriageability often emphasized as soon as girls turned eighteen: "*As soon as you turn 18, you're open to the market*".

Participants described marriage itself as an institution where traditional gender inequalities persisted. Many discussed the normalization of emotional dependency and control by husbands. For example, one

participant noted: "*Most of the guys are very controlling, very like 'I told you so', like 'Why didn't you ask permission?* "'. Others shared how women were expected to endure infidelity and lack of support during vulnerable times, such as pregnancy, without complaint: "*The guy does not even support the girl throughout her pregnancy, and the girl doesn't even think that that is something abnormal*". Financial dependence on husbands and lack of alternatives made leaving unhappy or abusive marriages particularly difficult. Concerns were experienced about the normalization of domestic violence in their home countries. One participant stated: "*A lot of men beat women in Uzbekistan*", while others pointed to high-profile tragedies as evidence of systemic failure: "*If you saw the recent news, wives are killing themselves because they cannot bear it anymore*". Such accounts reveal the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that frame marriage not only as a social expectation but also as a site of profound gendered vulnerability.

Across the interviews, a complex interplay between traditionalistic CA expectations and their personal aspirations shaped by migration, education, and globalization could be seen. Themes such as family and social pressure, cultural norms, gender inequalities, and shifting perceptions of marriage demonstrated both the persistence of traditional frameworks and formation of more individualized attitudes. While participants valued marriage, perceptions of it consistently focused on personal growth, emotional safety, and mutual respect. External influences, including international friendships, social media, and living alone, provided examples of alternative lifestyles that supported critical reflection, and sometimes, a reconfiguration of marriage as an individual choice rather than an inherited cultural obligation. These findings provide a platform for a deeper discussion on how cultural identity, gender and migration interact in shaping CA women's attitudes towards marriage.

4. Discussion

This study explored the tension between inherited cultural expectations surrounding marriage and the emerging possibilities of personal autonomy that many CA women currently face. The findings suggest that while traditional norms remain persistent, globalization, migration, and education have created spaces for resistance, reinterpretation, and self-definition. The thematic analysis identified two main themes accentuating the tension between external expectations and internal agency, and the evolving rationales and structural constraints shaping young CA women's attitudes toward marriage. Consistent with prior research on marriage in CA contexts, participants described pervasive familial and societal pressure to marry, often framed as a moral obligation and marker of respectability [17,32]. Analysis revealed that the general pressure towards marriage experienced by young women derives mainly from family and societal expectations. Immediate and extended family members often emphasize the cultural necessity of marriage to their female relatives, and so does the adjacent social circle [9]. These cultural norms around marriage remain embedded in the collective consciousness of CA communities, rendering women who attempt to deviate from established expectations particularly vulnerable to social scrutiny [36]. Nevertheless, with the expansion of opportunities for women and increased global exposure to different perspectives, traditional norms and expectations become more susceptible to reevaluation, making the negotiation of marriage progressively critical. In line with this, Afridi et al. [50] found that increased access to economic opportunities for women in South Asia has led to shifting gender dynamics within households, prompting more critical negotiations around traditional marriage roles and expectations.

In this light, personal aspirations are gaining more weight and attention among women who are becoming more autonomous and focusing on self-actualization. Traditionalistic ways of getting married might become less intrusive in this process, allowing space for a more balanced way to establish partnerships, where emotional support, mutual respect, and compatibility are appreciated more. Although individualistic traits and female autonomy are becoming more widespread, systematic challenges, such as gender inequalities and patriarchal frameworks, make achieving a more egalitarian social construct complicated, despite modern legal reforms in favor of equality [51]. The findings of this study illustrate

how marriage attitudes are comprehensively construed, contested, and reimagined among CA women who moved abroad.

Understanding these experiences would be incomplete without engaging broader theoretical frameworks that clarify how gender, identity, culture, and power are socially formed and navigated. Participants' narratives, in particular, reflect the core principles of the social construction of gender [10], which suggests that marriage expectations among many CA girls are formed through early socialization to gender roles that correspond to socially acceptable norms. It becomes visible from the participant's responses, however, that this early socialization might not be as uniformly prominent among the current generation of young CA women. This shift may indicate that these traditionalistic norms are losing their prominence, particularly within more progressive families or communities.

Moreover, participants' experiences illustrate that gender performativity [20] is being actively rewritten through exposure to new environments, including living abroad, accessing higher education, and being able to delay marriage. Participants may have more freedom for choice and personal agency, which enables them to move away from "performing" conventional roles of 'ideal daughter' or 'ideal bride'. The results show that reinforcement of male dominance within marriage roles and broader social structures reflects the dynamic of hegemonic masculinity [25]. Participants' narratives reveal that gendered expectations and behaviors are not only learned through early socialization but also reinforced by persistent patterns of male authority and influence, which remain deeply rooted in many CA communities [14].

The participants' narratives also reflect processes described in Hall's [39] theory of cultural identity and diaspora. As young CA women living abroad, they navigate a complex interplay between their inherited cultural frameworks and the values of their new environments. Rather than simply replacing old norms with new ones, their identities evolve as hybrid constructions that blend traditional expectations with emerging individualistic ideals. A study done in the same vein suggests that in a culture similar to that of CA, where social influence and traditionalistic values are persistent, women acquire more liberal views without refusing their cultural values [45]. This hybridity often leads to tensions, such as valuing familial loyalty while simultaneously prioritizing personal autonomy in marriage decisions. Psychologically, such tensions may involve ongoing identity negotiation rather than linear adaptation. For many CA women, exposure to Western ideas about partnership, gender equality, and emotional fulfillment has not weakened their attachment to CA cultural belonging but has prompted a reinterpretation of what marriage can mean within a shifting global context.

Consistent with the existing literature on marriage and cultural traditions in the CA region [17,18,32], this study reaffirms that marriage continues to function as a core social institution of control shaped by social expectations around gender roles, value of family honour, and kinship expectations [23]. Participants' reports of familial pressure and early marriage expectations echo Cleuziou's findings on the centrality of kinship in marital decisions and align with Brusina's observations regarding normative marriage timelines.

However, in contrast to much prior research, this study reveals how personal ambition, higher education, and global exposure are enabling CA women to reimagine their marriage expectations. They demonstrate personal agency and reveal more fluid gender identities, as per Butler's [20] theory of gender performativity, suggesting that traditional gender scripts are more negotiable for diaspora youth. Nevertheless, exposure to Western cultural models leads to hybrid identities that neither fully reject nor fully abide to traditional frameworks.

From a mental health perspective, the findings suggest that marriage attitudes are closely intertwined with perceived emotional safety, agency, and future well-being. Participants' emphasis on delaying marriage until achieving personal stability may reflect adaptive coping strategies aimed at reducing exposure to relational stress and gendered harm. Although this study did not measure mental health outcomes directly, participants' narratives indicate that constrained marital choices, lack of support, and normalized inequality may be experienced as psychologically distressing, while autonomy, social support

networks, and alternative relational models may function as protective factors. Also, it is worth highlighting that this study focuses specifically on young CA women, a group for whom marriage pressure is often most intense and temporally salient. While findings cannot be generalized to all women, they provide insight into a critical developmental period during which identity formation, autonomy, and future planning are especially relevant. Furthermore, although participants originated from different CA countries, the analytic aim was not to compare national contexts but to explore shared psychosocial processes among diaspora women navigating similar structural and cultural tensions.

5. Conclusions

This study provided an in-depth exploration of how young Central Asian women living abroad perceive and negotiate the meaning of marriage. Using RTA within a social constructionist framework, it was found that participants' experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of traditional cultural expectations, global influences, and emerging personal aspirations. While collective pressures surrounding marriage remain strong, migration, education, and exposure to new cultural models have allowed participants to critically reevaluate and sometimes redefine their attitudes toward marriage. This study provides important insights into the shifting gender identities and marriage frameworks among diaspora youth and offers a foundation for future research, policy initiatives, and educational programs aimed at supporting young women's autonomy and well-being. Future research can build on this to explore longitudinal changes in attitudes over time. The present study extends existing theories of social construction of gender, gender performativity, and cultural identity by applying them to the understudied context of Central Asian migrant youth. It shows how gender roles and cultural expectations are not simply reproduced but are dynamically reshaped through exposure to new social realities. Finally, it highlights that expanding social support networks can offer safe spaces to explore identity, share experiences, and make autonomous decisions about marriage without cultural pressures.

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Author Contributions

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct, and relevant laws and institutional guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent's University London (Protocol Code: 1913; Date of Approval: 11 May 2025).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed written consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Datasets of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests of personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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