

Dangerous Destinations

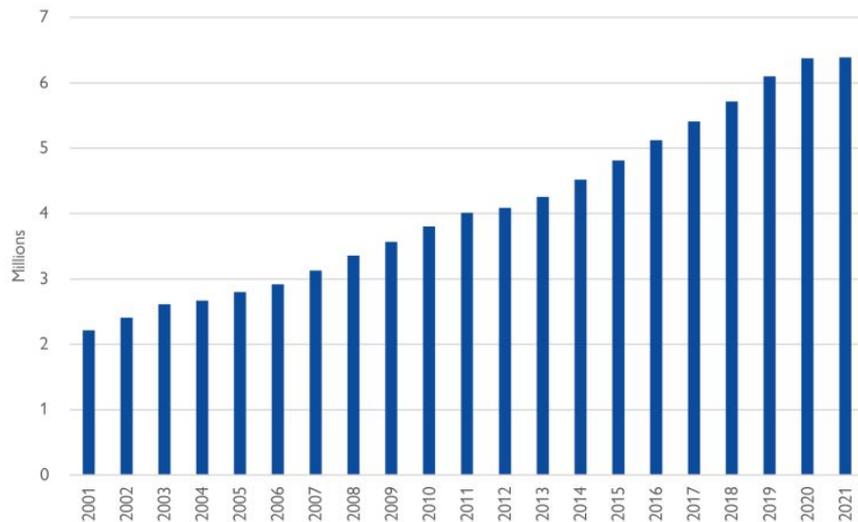
How Gendered Security Concerns shape South Asian Expatriate Parents University Destination Decisions

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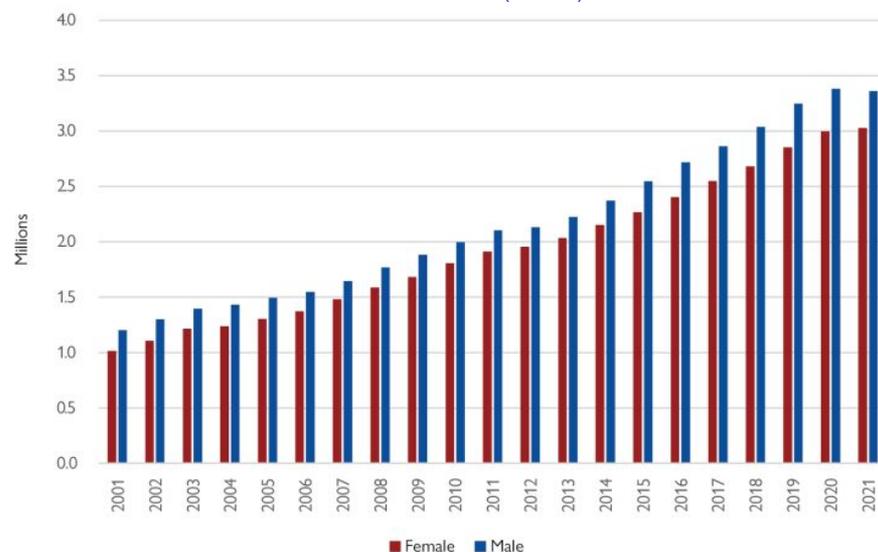


Background: International Student Migration

International students globally,
2001 to 2021



Internationally mobile students globally by gender,
2001–2021 (millions)



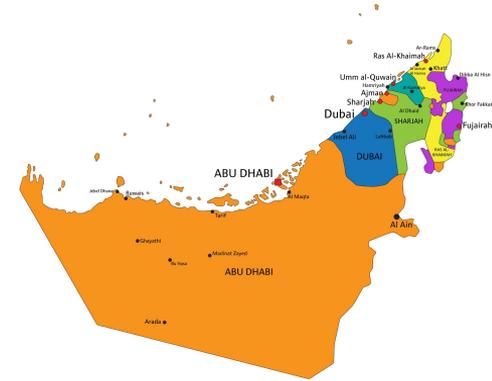
Research Questions

When studying in either the origin country or overseas may appear to present safety concerns...

- **How do South Asian *expatriate* parents navigate the university destination decision process for their daughters?**

Case Study: South Asian Expatriate Parents in the UAE

- ~85% of population is foreign
 - Estimated 65% is South Asian, with Indians being the largest source country (~4 million) (Ali 2010; Vora 2013)
- Most South Asians are in blue-collar occupations
 - But 15% of Indians are white-collar = 600,000 "expatriates" who can sponsor their families to live with them
- Appeal of the UAE to South Asian expatriates (Paul & Rabel 2025)
 - Geographical proximity to South Asia
 - Cultural resonance
 - Zero income taxes
 - High standard of living
 - High levels of public safety
- Downsides: Permanent temporariness (Vora 2013)



UAE as a Regional Education Hub

- Over 100 institutions of higher education
 - Most private
- 2nd-highest number of IBCs after China
(Cross-Border Education Research Team 2023)
 - Most affiliated with Western universities
- In 2016 - UAE hosted 220,000 international university students (Umar and Rahman 2023)
 - Most were UAE-raised foreign residents
- UAE's appeal (Paul and Parwani forthcoming)
 - Improved quality and variety of degrees
 - Safety
 - Range of cost options
 - Deferred mobility



Literature Review

- Safety concerns an important consideration in ISM destination selection process
 - Specific safety concerns for specific countries ([Nyland et al. 2010](#))
 - E.g. USA - racial discrimination against Asians, social and political unrest, and targeting of Muslim students in particular ([Allen and Ye 2021](#); [Suspitsyna 2021](#))
 - But safety is less of a concern for male students where facing risk is how they become men ([Osella and Osella 2000](#); [Monsutti 2007](#))
- But safety concerns are also present in South Asia
 - In India, rising number of sexual assaults reported on college campuses ([Dasgupta and Mukherjee 2020](#))
 - For Indian female students, studying overseas might feel *more* safe ([Simic 2021](#); [Paul 2021](#))
- Role of parents in ISM
 - Accepted that parents often act as a “compass” for their children ([Hawthorne 2010](#); [Walton-Roberts 2015](#))
 - But only two framings: Boosters or planners of their children’s mobility pathways vs Barriers to their children’s migration dreams ([Hawthorne 2010](#); [Walton-Roberts 2015](#); [Sondhi and King 2017](#))
 - Not enough substantive discussion of how parents balance their goals *and* concerns (especially for daughters)

Research Design and Methods

- **Mixed methods approach**

- Online survey of 110 South Asian parents
- Interviews with 32 South Asian parents
- Interviews with 4 college admissions coaches + 1 parent who was also a coach
- Participant-observation at multiple international education fairs and university open-houses in the UAE

- **Eligibility criteria for parents**

- Citizen of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Nepal
- Resided in the UAE for at least 1 year
- Parent to a child currently or previously studying at a UAE high school



Demographics of Survey Respondents (N = 110)

Country of Nationality		Gender of Parent		Highest Educational Level		Household Monthly Income (AED)	
India	86.4%	Male	16.4%	Less than Bachelor's	7.3%	Less than 20,000	25.7%
Pakistan	4.5%	Female	83.6%	Bachelor's degree	38.2%	20,001-30,000	22.9%
Sri Lanka	6.4%			Master's degree	46.4%	30,001-50,000	24.8%
Bangladesh	1.8%			Doctoral/Professional degree	5.5%	50,001-75,000	12.5%
Nepal	0.9%					75,001-100,000	6.7%
						Over 100,000	7.6%
Religion		% of Parents with a Child at Each Level					
Hindu	43.6%			High School	70.9%		
Muslim	34.5%			In an Undergraduate Program	30.9%		
Christian	12.7%			Completed Undergraduate Studies	17.3%		
Other/Prefer not to say	9.1%						

Destination Options by Gender

Distribution of Children by University Location, by Gender of Child (N = 48)

Country	Daughters (N = 22)	Sons (N = 26)
West	12 (54.6%)	11 (42.3%)
UAE	7 (31.8%)	10 (38.5%)
Home Country	3 (13.6%)	5 (19.2%)

Notes: Only counts children currently in university or graduated from university

- However, no statistically significant association between gender and destination ($p = 0.70$)

Interview Findings

- **Gender egalitarianism** in parents' views about their children's educational futures
- **Gender protectionism** in daughters' **sub-migration decisions**
- Destination imaginaries included a **spectrum of safety**
- Accepting (some) **risk** as part of their daughters' maturation process

Gender Egalitarianism

- Many parents, particularly mothers, were adamant that their daughters should have the same educational opportunities as their sons

“In the past few years, **the past conception about being a little more worried about girls has kind of evaded**. I don't think that exists much. Because I've seen some very conservative families sending their daughters to these countries [in the West] to study.” - *Aarti, mother of a girl and boy; daughter studying in the USA*

“I had no inhibition at all! Absolutely no inhibition at all to send them away.” - *Shreya, mother of two girls, both studying in the UK*

- Fathers more likely to be nervous about their daughters studying overseas

“So we were thinking of [...] the University of Sussex. The campus is very good. It is relatively safe. And so that was our [plan]. But now my husband is talking about UAE just because **he doesn't want to let his little princess away from his side!** [*laughs*]” - *Manasi, mother of a girl*

“**There is no boy-girl difference**. Nothing like that! [...] Because my parents' upbringing was different. They were like, 'Girls should be like this. Girls shouldn't go to play.' They didn't allow me to play cricket! [So] I decided, when I become a parent, I won't allow this type of patriarchal things in my children's life.” - *Rana, mother of a girl and boy; daughter studying in Canada*

“Because for her, I don't think we're considering anything outside the UAE. Although at certain points in time, I was like, 'Yeah, maybe she might learn a lot if she lives outside.' [But] **she does wear the hijab, and that security might be a concern for us**. So there is very little chance she'll go out.” - *Lateef, father of three; son studying in the UAE*

Gender Protectionism

- Even though willing to send daughters overseas, more conversations about living arrangements, need for nearby family, direct travel, etc. when it came to daughters.
- More vetoes of particular destinations
- Parental intervention in daughters' "sub-migration decisions" framed as for their safety

There'll be men coming. There'll be boys coming. We have no control over it. And its not something she's used to. ... "I said, 'One thing, she has to have **a room with an attached bath[room]**.' I don't know if I'd been would have been that particular if it was a boy. But with a girl, I said, 'Nothing doing! The rent, whatever we pay, we have to pay, but the bath[room] has to be attached.' [...] If she has to use a washroom at night, I want it to be a safe space. - *Lizzie, mother of one daughter going to the Netherlands*

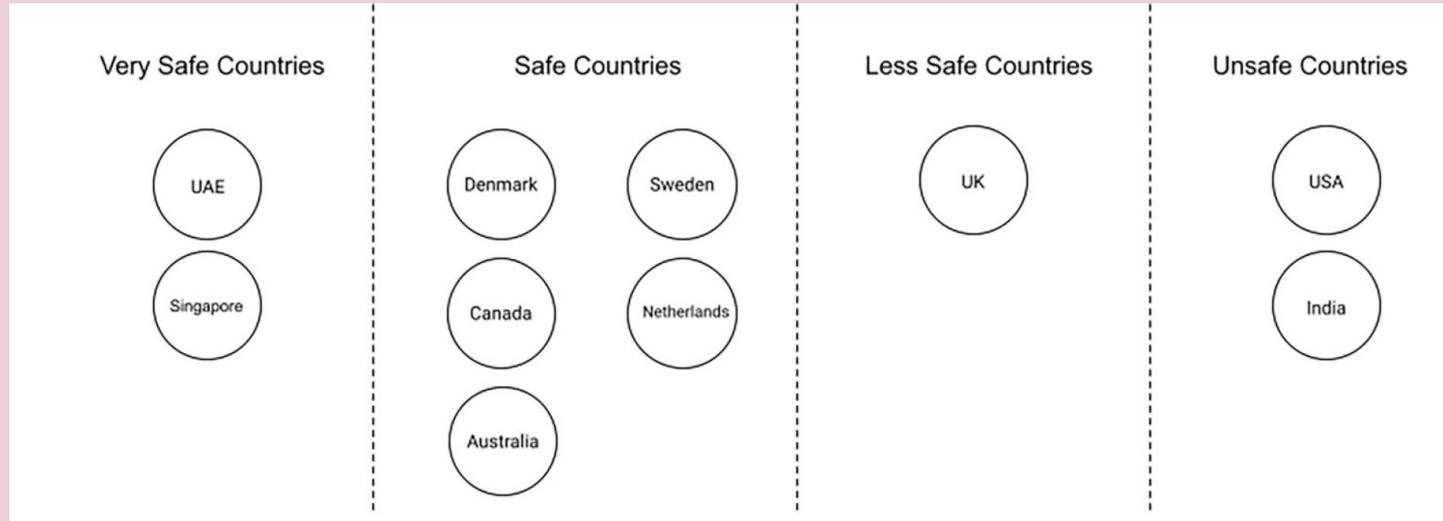
Because I felt for her undergraduate, **[Canada] was too far**. I'll be very upfront about it. Because I said, 'PG, anywhere is fine.' [...] I said, "She's yet to turn 18... If you want to come back home or even for us to reach Canada somehow seems more inaccessible." - *Lizzie*

"Being our firstborn and daughter at that, we wanted her to get into a **direct flight** and go and land in Heathrow and then take that Uber, one-hour Uber, to Reading University. That was our consideration. Whereas Nottingham, she would have had to go via-via-via. So yeah, that was the second thought which came to our minds. - *Disha, mother of a girl and boy; daughter graduated from a UK university*

"So there was one consideration in the selection of the college. We selected the college **where someone is staying nearby**. [...] Friends, relatives, yeah, both are same. Now, she is in Pittsburgh. So one of our close friends is near her college. 12 minute drive. So all those things, it matters." - *Dimple, mother of 2 daughters, both studying in US universities*

Destinations positioned along a Spectrum of Safety

- Construction of different destinations as more or less dangerous
- Influenced parents' destination preferences
- Educational consultants shared that “students are not into the safety bit, but parents are.”



Unsafe Countries: India and USA

- “Home” country of India was seen by many Indian parents as very dangerous due to substance abuse and sexual harassment concerns
- The USA while seen as having very good universities was viewed as increasingly dangerous too

Because when I checked the safety indices, Canada is coming sixth place. And the US is coming 72nd place! [Rana laughs in disbelief.] *See the difference! [...] That year, in 2023, whenever I opened the newspaper, a shootout happens in the US. Shootout in Philadelphia and California. So how can I send my child? It was like, how we are buying bread, chocolates from the groceries—like that, they are buying guns! Oh, my God!* [Rana laughs again remembering.] *It is horrible! So I say, “Okay, better Canada!”* - Rana

Most of the parents prefer sending students to [the] Netherlands, Ireland, and UK for the safety. And Canada. [Only] then the US. **The shooting is too much. So kids avoid, and parents avoid sending to the US.** - Priyam, agent

“They’re growing in a very different culture out here. They’re a little more modern, you know? Showing their midriff, walking around with sleeveless clothes. If you go to India and you did all that, **you’d probably get lynched somewhere or you get raped somewhere.** [...] This is the only reason we don’t send our children back home, you know? - *Vaishali, who refused to send her daughter to study in India*

I don’t have anyone in India. I mean, my husband’s parents, his mother is there, but she’s very old to take care of my daughter. So for safety concerns also, I thought better try this way, so that she’ll be here with us. *Tania, whose daughter enrolled in an online Indian university to stay in the UAE*

The Need for a Little Danger

- Parents spoke of not wanting their safety/security concerns to hamper their children too much
- They acknowledged that the UAE was an unrealistic benchmark when it came to safety
- Danger (in small proportions) reframed as an important learning experience **for daughters too**, not just sons

“What I'm saying is, **my fears won't be a barrier for her dreams.** That's the only reason I send her [to Canada.] Not like I'm a very strong, fearless parent! Nothing like that!” - *Rana, daughter in Canada*

“As a parent, I always fear for their security. **But a human being has to learn to take care of themselves.** Like we are not going to be around forever. So as a mother, to just always be scared that something will go wrong and something will happen to their child is not correct, you know? At some point, your child has to learn to take care of themselves.” - *Shreya, daughters in the UK*

“UAE is very safe for everyone, okay? **So, many senses don't work here. Like they don't have to be scared, they don't have to be vigilant, they don't have to be cautious,** there's nothing! Whereas I feel for, you know, in the long run as a person to live in a society, [...] that's the senses you need. You need to be wary of all the things that could go wrong, how can you be a better person and those kind of things. Here, things are taken for granted, [...] you know you're going to be safe. So your tolerance and all that is very less, right? **Whereas when you go and survive in a very different environment, you learn how to survive.**” - *Rekha, son in HS, wants to send him to a Western university*

As parents, we always want children to be closer to us. But see, **we have to give them wings!** And during these 12 years, we have been building their wings, right? **Now, we have to allow them to fly. If we don't allow them to fly, what is the use of the wings?** - *Devika*

Implications

- Parents cared about safety in **both gendered *and* ungendered** ways
- Ungendered ways:
 - Believed in equality of opportunity for their children
 - Understood that the UAE was almost “too safe” for all children
 - While they saw some destinations as dangerous for both daughters and sons
- Gendered ways:
 - Gendered attention to overseas destination selection to increase their daughters’ safety
 - More intervention in the sub-migration process with daughters
- Parents were attempting to balance their gender egalitarian principles with their gendered protectionist impulse

Discussion and Conclusion

- Contributions
 - Acknowledgement of how parents are often juggling fears and aspirations for their children's migrations
 - Gender operates in more subtle ways beyond mobility vs immobility
- Limitations
 - Uniqueness of the UAE case study
 - Relatively small size of survey sample - so no regression analyses
 - Parental social class
- Future research:
 - Shifting destination imaginaries about the US and other Western countries **post-Trump**
 - Interviewing children to understand their point of view
 - Role of religion vis-a-vis other factors



Thank you!

[“Dangerous Destinations”](#)

- just published open access in *Migration Studies*

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Average Household Income by University Location (for children currently in university) (N = 28)

University Location	Selected Universities chosen by survey respondents	Average Monthly Household Income	Number of Respondents
West	University of Toronto (Canada) University of British Columbia (Canada) University of Nottingham (UK) Indiana University (USA)	AED57,500	13
UAE	Heriot-Watt University Dubai American University of Sharjah New York University Abu Dhabi Middlesex University Dubai University of Birmingham Dubai	AED26,500	10
Home Country (India)	St. Xavier's College Mumbai Fatima College Indira Gandhi National Open University	AED12,500	5

- A significant association was found between religion (being Muslim) and university destination ($p = 0.027$), with Muslim parents more likely to send their children to the UAE.