

Arranged Marriages, Rearranged Ideas

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By Stan Karp

Jihana was one of my favorite students. By the time she was a senior, we had been together for three years, first in a sophomore English class and then through two years of journalism electives where students produced school publications and learned desktop publishing. Jihana's bright-eyed intelligence and can-do enthusiasm made her a teacher's dream. Her daily greeting in our busy journalism office was, "Hi, Mr. Karp, what needs to be done?" I used to joke that she'd get straight A's until the end of her senior year when I'd have to fail her so she couldn't graduate and leave. It was corny, but she always laughed.



Muslim teenagers from the Chicago area.

Jihana was one of a growing number of Bengali students in my Paterson, New Jersey high school. Along with increasing numbers of Latin American, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Central European, and other immigrants, these new communities had transformed the school in the twenty years I'd been there as a teacher. What had once been a predominantly white, then later a primarily black and Latino student population, was now thoroughly international. The teaching staff, however, remained mostly white, with a limited number of African Americans and Latinos. Increasingly, some of my best students each year were young Bengali women. Some, like Jihana, covered their heads with scarves in keeping with Muslim tradition. A few wore the full veil. Others wore no special dress. Many seemed reserved and studious. Others gradually adopted the more assertive, outgoing styles of the citywise teens around them.

An Arranged Marriage

By the time Jihana was a senior it was natural to ask, during one of the many extra periods she spent in the journalism office, what her post-graduation plans were. She said she wanted to go to college, perhaps to study medicine, and was considering several schools. But, she added, a lot depended on whether she had to get married.

I knew enough about Jihana, and about the Bengali community, to know that she wasn't referring to a premature wedding prompted by an unplanned pregnancy, but to the possibility of an arranged marriage. Jihana made it pretty clear that she wasn't ready to get married. She was anxious to go to college and to move out of a household where she felt she had too many cleaning chores and child-care duties and not enough personal freedom. She said the outcome partly depended on what happened with her sister, who was several years older and also a candidate for marriage, and on whether her family decided to send them both back to Bangladesh in the summer for possible matches.

I listened sympathetically and made schoolteacher noises about how smart I thought she was and how I hoped she'd get the opportunity to attend college. Unsure of just what my role, as a white, male high school teacher, could possibly be in this situation, I halfheartedly offered to speak to her family about her college potential if she thought it would help. Jihana smiled politely and said she'd keep me posted.

I went home thinking about Jihana's situation. I was seriously upset, even angered by the thought that this young woman's promising prospects and educational future could be sidetracked by a cultural practice that seemed to me hopelessly unreasonable and unfair. No matter how I tried to come to terms with it, the custom of arranged marriages was completely alien to my own sensibilities and to my expectations for my students. I kept thinking of how my own high school-aged daughter, raised at home and, at least nominally, at school, to think in terms of gender equality and independence, would laugh in my face if I ever sat her down and tried to tell her my plans for her marital future.

I also thought, and not for the first time, about what my responsibilities were as a public school teacher, and how I should manage this mix of my own strongly held personal opinions, concern for my students' well-being, and respect for the cultural differences that were increasingly prominent in my school community.

As both a political activist and a classroom teacher, I'd wrestled with these issues often. On the one hand, I'd come to believe that effective classroom teaching, especially in schools with a history of failure and pervasive student alienation, was inherently "political" in the sense that it had to take the social context of schooling and of students' lives as a primary point of departure. I tried to encourage students to "talk back" to the world we studied, and, wherever possible, take action in response to ideas and issues. These premises informed any number of choices I made daily about curriculum, classroom organization, and about how to channel in particular directions the "oppositional energy" I found in most teenagers. It also meant I frequently tried to take real situations in my students' lives, both in and out of school, as starting points for research, writing, and class discussion.

At the same time, I know it is neither appropriate nor fair for teachers to restrict the curriculum to only those views and ideas that they personally agree with. Since teachers have power over students, it's especially necessary to be sensitive to issues of intimidation, the rights of dissent, personal privacy, and freedom of choice. In some ways, the closer issues hit to home, as in Jihana's situation, the more careful teachers must be, particularly where racial, cultural, and class differences are involved.

At first glance, Jihana's problem seemed personal and private, not readily the stuff of classroom discussion. It had social roots and cultural dimensions like other student concerns that had become the subject of class assignments or research. But it seemed to call for an individual, personal response on my part, rather than a pedagogical one, and I had real trouble imagining what that response should be.

Reluctance to Intervene

As a rule, I have generally been reluctant to intervene at home when it comes to handling personal and family issues with my teenage students. Though I've always supported parents' participation in their children's education, for me, this usually meant support for parent participation in governance and policy-making processes, or finding ways to include parent and family experience in my curriculum. But when personal (as opposed to strictly academic) problems arise with secondary-age students, I've always hesitated to "call home" too quickly. Most of the 15-18-year-olds I deal with are emerging adults who've been semi-independent to varying degrees for years: holding down jobs, assuming family responsibilities, traveling the world, dealing with the courts and immigration authorities, and even coping with parenthood themselves. Others come from difficult family situations that are not always supportive or, not infrequently, may even be the source of the problems they choose to share with me. In the normal course of a year, it's not unusual for me to deal with teenagers who are wrestling with everything from homelessness, pregnancy, and sexual identity, to depression, domestic violence, and drug abuse.

When my students bring such issues to me, I've always felt that my first allegiance was to them, to listen sympathetically and to offer whatever advice or access to services I could manage, and not, primarily, to act as a surrogate for, or even mediator with, parental authority. Yes, there have been occasions when my judgment, or the legal responsibilities that are periodically spelled out in nervous memos from central office, compel me to pick up the phone or make a home visit. But in general I take my signal about whether home intervention on my part makes sense from my students, and most of the time it doesn't. There have also been times when I've passed on information about where to get birth control or other kinds of counseling services, (e.g. for gay teens) that I knew might not be fully endorsed at home.

In Jihana's case I tried to imagine what I could possibly say to her family about the situation: "Hi, I'm Jihana's teacher, and as a politically progressive, pro-feminist, privileged white male, I think your plans for Jihana are a medieval abomination." I don't think so. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the problem wasn't finding more diplomatic ways to voice my opinions; the problem was figuring out the dividing line between responding to the needs of my students and interfering inappropriately with "other people's children."

I also thought about another student I had some ten years earlier, Rafia, who faced this same situation. Rafia was the youngest of four daughters in a Bengali family. Smart, sophisticated beyond her years, and ambitious, Rafia was anxious to go to college despite her family's objections. As I encouraged her and helped her fill out applications during her junior and senior years, it was Rafia who first made me aware that many Bengali families did not think girls should go to college, and that she and her sisters were facing, with varying degrees of dread, the prospect of arranged marriages.

I was horrified at the idea, and said so. In fact, as I recall, my main reaction consisted in expressing my outrage that women were oppressed this way in her culture. I told her I didn't think anyone had the right to tell her who to marry, and that it was much more important for her future to go to college than to please her

parents. I even suggested that it was more important to choose college than to avoid a break with her family, and that, even if they got upset, they would probably get over it. I somewhat flippantly told her she could stay at my house for a while if she decided to run away.

Learning a Lesson

When Jihana's story jogged my memory, it was with more than a little embarrassment that I recalled how my reaction to Rafia had been foolish and not a little arrogant. At the time, I had acted as if the most important response to Rafia's dilemma was to show her that not everyone was so "backward" as her parents, and that there were swell, "enlightened" folks like myself who believed in her right to shape her own future and education. In effect, I was showing off the "superior" values and "advanced" thinking of "progressive western culture," especially of radicals like myself, and contrasting it to the "underdeveloped practices" of her own community, which I encouraged her to reject. I had also reacted as if what I thought and how I felt about the issues raised by her predicament were of paramount importance, and should be the point of departure for my response.

Looking back, it seemed that the problem wasn't that I was wrong to oppose the custom of arranged marriages or make my opinions known, but that I did it in a way that was essentially self-serving, and as a practical matter, not very helpful. I had basically denounced what I, as an outsider, saw as "deficient" in her culture and encouraged her to turn her back on it. While my sympathies may have been well-meant, my advice was culturally insensitive and wildly impractical. And it probably just reinforced Rafia's sense of alienation and being trapped.

Fortunately, Rafia was sharp enough to appreciate my personal support and ignore my advice. Instead of running away or openly breaking with her family, she steadfastly argued for her chance to attend college while continuing to excel in school. Eventually, she got her father's permission to go to college (though she was forced to study engineering instead of the humanities she preferred). The experience had stayed with me over the years, and now that a similar situation had arisen, I was anxious to do better by Jihana.

A couple of weeks passed after our first conversation, and it became clear that nothing decisive would happen with Jihana's situation until the summer came. Still looking for a way to lend support, one day I suggested to Jihana that she consider writing a story about arranged marriages for our student magazine. I mentioned briefly my experience with Rafia and asked how the growing community of female Bengali students in the high school felt about this and related issues. Instead of dwelling on my own opinions, I tried to emphasize that she wasn't the only one facing these issues, and that she could perform a service for both Bengali students and the rest of the school by focusing on a set of concerns that had gotten little attention.

Jihana seemed interested but hesitant. She was a good writer but generally took less ambitious assignments like covering school news or activities. She expressed some concern that her family would be offended if they found out, and that, in the tightly-knit Bengali community, it might be hard to keep it a secret even if she published a piece anonymously. I asked her to think it over and told her she could get credit for writing the article even if she decided in the end not to publish it. I also told her, as I did all my students, that we could consider the implications or consequences of going public later, but she should write what she really thought and not censor herself in advance. I was hoping to use the tremendous potential that writing has, not only to help students express their ideas and feelings, but also to help them develop the skills, and sometimes the distance, needed to analyze complicated topics and clarify issues. While I hoped Jihana would eventually publish, it seemed valuable to have her organize and express her thoughts for her own purposes as well. After a few days, and after double checking that she wouldn't have to publish the piece if she wasn't comfortable, she agreed. She asked for help making an outline, so we arranged a story conference.

A Broader Context

When we started discussing how to organize the article, Jihana said she wanted to deal first with stereotypes and misconceptions that Westerners had about Muslims. She said she wanted to put the issue of arranged marriages in a broader context of Muslim culture, which had a variety of customs and practices that she felt were misunderstood. Muslim women were not "slaves," she said, and not everyone did things the same way. When it came to marriage, there were a range of practices, and in many cases, Muslim women did have choices and varying degrees of input in the decision.

This led to a discussion of women and marriage customs in general, and how women have faced oppression and male supremacy in all cultures. We also talked about the generational conflict between young Bengalis (and other younger immigrants) raised in the United States, and their parents, rooted in more traditional, "old country" customs, and how this exacerbated the struggle over marriage practices. Jihana told me stories about families that had been torn apart by these differences, and others where parents and children had found common ground and happy endings.

As we talked, several things started to become clear. By locating the issue of arranged marriages inside the broader issue of woman's rights, which cuts across all cultures and countries, it became easier for Jihana to address the topic without "stigmatizing" her own community. If Bengali women had to wrestle with arranged marriages and male dominance, the supposedly more "liberated" sexual culture of the United States presented women with its own set of problems: higher levels of sexual assault, single teenage parenthood, divorce, and domestic violence. Generational conflict between old ways and new also cut across cultures and made the issue seem more universal, again allowing it to be addressed in a context that didn't demonize one particular group.

Finally, it was clear that speaking on behalf of Bengali women, instead of just against the practice of arranged marriages, tended to make Jihana feel more empowered than isolated. She was still determined to question the imposition of marital arrangements against the woman's will, but would do so in the context of defending Muslim culture against stereotypes and as part of a critique of women's oppression as a whole. Added to the protection she felt from not having to publish her work if she chose not to, assuming this positive stance on behalf of herself and her peers seemed to give her the safe space she needed from which to address these difficult issues. By the end of our conversation, she seemed ready to go. Within a week or two, Jihana was back with her article.

"Do Muslim women have any rights?" she began. "Do they make their own decisions? Are they allowed to think? Are they prisoners in their own homes? There are many stereotypes held by Westerners about the position and role of Muslim women. ... These notions are based upon the lack of knowledge Westerners have of Islam."

She continued, "Women, regardless of their culture or society, have suffered tremendously over inequality and have had to fight for a firm place in their society. During the Roman civilization, a woman was considered to be a slave. The Greeks bought and sold their women as merchandise rather than accept them as human beings. Early Christianity regarded their women as 'temptresses,' responsible for the fall of Adam.

"In Pre-Islamic times, as well as in certain places today, a female child is thought of as a cause for unhappiness and grief. Baby girls were sometimes buried alive after birth. But gaps in wealth, education, and justice between men and women can be found everywhere and just can't be explained by religion." Jihana went on to discuss "some issues about the rights of a Muslim woman [that] stem from the issue of marriage." She wrote about the varying degrees of choice women may have in different families, the generational conflict, the problems associated with patterns of marriage in the United States, ("Some Muslim families say that while the Westerners seem to be 'more free,' their society is not working too well.") She cited examples to show that, "As in all marriages, whether arranged or not, some work and some do not."

Though many of the Bengali students Jihana spoke to declined to be quoted by name, she did find one senior who "extremely disagrees with arranged marriages" and who thought "all Muslim women should be given an opportunity and the privilege to choose the person that they want to spend the rest of their lives with."

After exploring the issues from several sides, Jihana came to a balancing act that suggested her own personal struggle. "Arranged marriages and other Muslim customs of life, like the covering of the body and not dating, may seem to be burdensome to women of most western cultures, but for Muslim women it's their way of life. We were brought up to follow and believe that these practices were the right ways of life. It is up to us as individuals to see that we follow what is expected of us. ... The Muslim religion, in my opinion, can include double standards. ... In many cases males are allowed to do certain things that females can't. ... For example, when a male does get married without his parents' permission, it is okay, but if a female does the same thing it is not okay. This is so because in the Holy Koran it states that a woman has to follow certain things. For example, it is a woman's duty and obligation to bring up her children according to the ways of Islam. She has to look after the family and has absolute control over domestic affairs. She must wear a covering cloak when meeting adult men outside her family. She is her husband's helpmate. Islam recognizes the leadership of a man over a woman, but that does not mean domination.

"In conclusion women should have the freedom and right to do something they're interested in doing or accomplishing. They should go forward with their education if they want to continue it, with the help and support to do so. Women can cook and clean, but they could also do more."

At bottom, Jihana's "balancing act" was an affirmative statement about her place and her rights in her community. And though writing the article didn't resolve her dilemma, it did, I think, support her in her efforts to speak up for herself, and offered a way for her to develop some useful perspectives on her situation. It also helped focus attention on issues that she and her Bengali peers were wrestling with inside the school community.

New Pride

Though Jihana had originally balked at the idea of publication, by the time she was done she used the computer skills she'd learned in class to create a two-page layout for our magazine with her article, her byline, and her picture under the title, "Muslim Women: Where Do We Belong?" She seemed proud of it, and so was I, especially as I reflected on what I'd learned myself.

Switching the focus from my own reactions to my student's point of view, and developing a deeper appreciation of the need to deal with issues of cultural difference with more humility and care, had led me to a more effective and more appropriate response. I was still just as opposed as ever to arranged marriages, and still saw pitfalls and contradictions in Jihana's balancing act about the codes of Islam. But, because I hadn't begun with an attack on the cultural norms of her community, I had managed to find a way that, to some degree at least, both supported and empowered her.

As it turned out, Jihana's willingness to raise such issues was not limited to our magazine. One morning in the spring, I found her working feverishly in the journalism office on a list of "Bengali Concerns" for the next Student Government meeting. The list had a tone familiar from earlier days of student activism, but it had specifics I'd never seen before. It read:

1. How come there aren't more Bengali SGA members?
2. There is a lack of Bengali students involved in school activities. We need more participation and more representation of the Bengali people.
3. We need Bengali-speaking guidance counselors and teachers.
4. We need Bengali Mentors.
5. How come the history teachers never teach about Bangladesh and its culture when they teach world history?
6. Why isn't there Bengali student representation when the school presents a panel of students to represent the school?
7. How come all the newsletters that go home from the school are either in Spanish or in English? How come you can't send letters home that are in Bengali; that way the parents will know what is going on in their children's school. The lack of communication with the Bengali parents is a reason why many don't attend the Home-School Council meetings.

New Steps for Jihana

Around the same time that these concerns were being presented to the student government, preparations were underway for an assembly presentation of Bengali dance and traditional dress. Like many other schools, my high school is still in the relatively superficial stages of addressing multicultural issues, and tends toward food festivals and holiday celebrations. But the assembly program tapped the energy of many Bengali students, and Jihana had gotten involved. One afternoon, soon after our magazine had appeared, she came to the journalism office and asked if I could fax a copy of her article to a reporter from a local newspaper. She said she'd been interviewed in connection with the upcoming assembly program, but had left some things out. "I was trying to explain myself to the reporter and couldn't get the words out right," she said. "I told him I had written an article explaining what I thought, and it was all in there. I promised to send it to him." The article she had been hesitant to write and reluctant to publish had become a personal position statement.

As we headed into the last weeks of the school year, I occasionally asked Jihana if there were any new developments. There weren't any on the marriage front, but she did get accepted to several colleges and began to make plans to attend a state university. When we parted at year's end, I made her promise to let me know how things turned out.

About a month later, I returned from a trip to find a slightly ambiguous message. Jihana had called to say hello and to invite me to a wedding. Taken aback, and fearing that this might be her way of letting me

know that marriage had won out over college, I called her at home. She was in good spirits and busy getting ready to move into the dorms on her new campus. The invitation was to her sister's wedding, Jihana explained, and if I could come I'd get a chance to see some more of how Bengali marriage customs worked. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to attend, but Jihana promised to show me the proceedings on videotape. In September Jihana started college classes. A few weeks later, I got a note describing her new life. "College is OK," she wrote, "not that great as everyone said it would be. Maybe it is just me. I never realized how difficult my classes would be and so large in lectures!! I am taking an Arabic class so that I can be trilingual!"

"I have to go home every weekend, but I don't mind. I have a new status in my family; everyone respects me more, and I also don't have to do any more housework. Isn't that great??!" I had to agree that it was. *SStan Karp* (Stankarp@aol.com) teaches English and journalism in Paterson, NJ and is a Rethinking Schools *editorial associate*.

The student names in this story have been changed.

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