



The Linguistic Heritage of the Bangladeshi ‘New Communities’ of Venice (Italy) Between Italian and Bangla and Beyond

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Abstract This paper presents the initial findings of a sociolinguistic study conducted using ethnographic methods on the Bangladeshi community of Venice (Italy). Observations and interviews were carried out with migrants of different generations, genders, educational backgrounds and jobs concerning the Heritage Language field, with both Italian as a second language and Bangla. Following the journey of the diaspora, the social and linguistic composition of the community will be detailed, as well as beliefs and practices concerning language and its role as heritage, with particular attention given to women's conditions and opportunities.

Keywords Bangladesh. Immigration. Sociolinguistics. Heritage Language. Bangladeshi women.

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1 Introduction

Bangladeshi people are the second largest community in the Municipality of Venice, and Bangla is one of the first languages of the city, after Italian and with Chinese, Russian/Ukrainian, and so on. The demand for Italian courses by all nationalities, especially by Bangladeshis, is growing as steadily as the diversity of communities. In this research, Bangladeshi migrants of this area, of different social statuses, generations and genders were interviewed on their linguistic practices, difficulties in learning/using Italian as a second language, and about their mother tongue – Bangla – to understand how the multilingual Heritage of the community is developing.

Moreover, Bangla is an important Heritage for Bangladeshi people since Bangladesh was created on linguistic basis. After Western Pakistan forced Eastern Pakistan (present Bangladesh) on using Urdu, on the 21 February 1952 some students of Dhaka who gathered to demonstrate against this imposition and for the recognition of Bangla as an equally important language were killed. Globally on this date the UNESCO International Mother Language Day is observed every year.

In this paper, the first section will be devoted to the basis of this NRRP project, the Faro Convention, that will be linked to Heritage Languages. The research questions and methodology will be then delineated. In the second section the constitution and composition of the Venetian and then of the Bangladeshi-Venetian community will be presented, as well as its history, coming to the third section which will present the initial data on linguistic practices, challenges and opportunities related to the process of Italian learning alongside a first insight on the attitudes towards Bangla. A specific part will be devoted to women, a particularly vulnerable group of this community, as they are usually the target of many legislations and “anxiety about [...] effects and imagined failures of migration and multiculturalism [...] opaque backdrop to the agency of male migrants” (Alexander, Chatterji, Jalais 2015, 134). Taking notes of the point of view of every and each part of the community will give us a wider perspective on our understanding of Heritage.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 The Faro Convention and International Legislation: Where is Language?

The Faro Convention “promotes a wider understanding of heritage and its relationship to communities and society”.¹ It encourages protecting Heritage as a priority element of a goal of “cultural diversity” and respect for “different interpretations” on Heritage, as in art. 5(e). Member States commit themselves to develop Cultural Heritage as a resource to facilitate peaceful coexistence and to integrate all these methods into lifelong learning. In general, language is not considered as a part of Cultural Heritage to be protected, the latter being defined as “practices, representations and expressions, knowledge and skills [...] that communities, groups and in some cases individuals, recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (*UNESCO Convention for the Safeguard of Intangible Cultural Heritage* of 2003; Smeets 2004, 156). In many Proclamations and other international instruments² neither is the role of language central (it is only a “vehicle” of Intangible Cultural Heritage) nor is the legislation clear or mandatory, leaving the ultimate choice to Member States (Smeets 2004). In this matter, there is a “longstanding resistance of States to any external interference in national cultural policies and the codification of protection for intangible heritage, especially languages, at the international level” and in general a “sensitive matter linked to State-building and national identity” (Vrdoljak 2014, 139).

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, adopted in 1992 and effective in 1998, has the aim of protecting and promoting historical regional and minority languages in Europe. It specifically states that it can only be applied to historical languages

1 See the website of the Council of Europe Office in Venice to access the text of the Faro Convention, available at the following link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice/faro-convention>. The Faro Convention is a “framework convention” which defines issues at stake, general objectives and possible fields of intervention for member States to progress. Each State Party can decide on the most convenient means to implement the Convention according to its legal or institutional frameworks, practices and specific experience. The Convention was adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 13 October 2005, and opened for signature to member States in Faro (Portugal) on 27 October of the same year. It entered into force on 1 June 2011. To date, 24 member States of the Council of Europe have ratified the Convention and 4 have signed it. It was ratified by Italy on the 23 September 2020.

2 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* of 1966, art. 27 and *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* of 1992, art. 4.3, both of the UN; *Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* of UNESCO, 2001-5.

used by the nationals of the States Parties, excluding both dialects and the languages of the recent migration.³ Italy has not ratified this Charter.

2.2 National and Local Legislation on Languages

For what concerns Italy more specifically, the UNESCO portal states that there are some linguistic minorities, among those there are 12 Historical Linguistic Minorities, safeguarded by the Law no. 482/1999 *Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche* (Regulations concerning the safeguard of historical linguistic minorities).⁴ The safeguarded linguistic communities are Albanian, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian and Croatian, those speaking French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan and Sardinian. Moreover, the Central Institute for Intangible Heritage of the MIBACT (Ministry of Culture) has the aim of safeguarding the Cultural Heritage sustaining the diverse fields linked to the different collective identities of the various groups in the territory. According to both these legal instruments, the languages of migrants are not covered by the legislation.

On the local level, namely in Veneto, according to the Regional Law no. 9 of 13 April 2007, the region supports the safeguard and the valorisation of the Venetian linguistic heritage, specifying that:

Le specifiche parlate storicamente utilizzate nel territorio veneto e nei luoghi in cui esse sono state mantenute da comunità che hanno conservato in modo rilevante la medesima matrice costituiscono il veneto o lingua veneta.⁵

In addition, the above-mentioned Law no. 482/1999 is active in the region too, protecting Ladin, Cimbrian (a Germanic language) and Friulian and activating annually initiatives concerning linguistic

³ See the website of the Council of Europe to access the text of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages at the following link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/about-the-charter>.

⁴ To read the Italian Law no. 482/1999 regarding the Regulations concerning the safeguard of historical linguistic minorities access the following link: <https://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/99482l.htm>.

⁵ "The specific parlances historically used in the Venetian territory and in the places where these have been maintained by communities that have conserved significantly the same origin constitute Venetian or Venetian language". See the Veneto region website to read the full text of the Regional Law no. 9 of 13 April 2007, available at the following link: <https://bur.regione.veneto.it/BurVServices/pubblica/DettaglioLegge.aspx?id=196722>. All the translations in this paper are made by the Author.

minorities.⁶ In the Venetian legislation the languages of migrant communities are not covered either.

For migrants, certainly their mother tongue is vital as well as the language of the majority, through which they can access the Cultural Heritage as well as a relationship with the hosting society. Nowadays Bangladeshi's mother tongue is also a distinctive and omnipresent element of the community of Venice and the city itself, since the number of Bangladeshi activities and employers is growing more and more. The decision to safeguard and consider as Cultural Heritage only certain kinds of languages, as endangered languages (see Turin 2014) or traditional and historical languages, is linked to an "authorised heritage discourse", a hegemonic and institutionalised control on what can be Cultural Heritage, validated by expert knowledge (Smith 2006, 11). In this sense, only the authority has the role to protect or legislate on certain languages, not considering both ethnic and linguistic minorities and specific vulnerabilities, as well as the menaces from linguistic imperialism, globalisation and the growth of nationalism (Smeets 2004, 160; Bernini 2014, 165).

For what concerns the learning of Italian as a second language, there is no mandatory course to attend once entering Italy, apart from specific courses for unaccompanied minors, asylum seekers and international protection holders in the SAI project (Integrated Reception System).⁷ It is compulsory, though, for foreign citizens who have been legally living in Italy for more than 5 years and intend to apply for a long-term EC permit (art. 9 of the Consolidated Immigration Law) to take and pass the Italian language knowledge test (minimum A2 level of the CEFR, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), or to have a certificate of knowledge from the institutional certifying bodies, with different exemptions.⁸ In addition, the B1 test (CEFR) is mandatory to access different training courses and, according to the law 1/12/2018 no. 132, to obtain the Italian citizenship.

6 See the website of the Veneto region to read the regulations concerning linguistic minorities, available at the following link: <https://www.regione.veneto.it/web/relazioni-internazionali/minoranze-linguistiche>.

7 See the SAI (Integrated Reception System) project website and understand the aims of the project accessing the following link: <https://www.retesai.it/attivita-e-servizi/accoglienza-integrata/>.

8 See the website of the Italian Minister of Interior to read the regulations of Italian as a second language tests to obtain permanent residence permits at the following link: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/modalita-dingresso/test-conoscenza-lingua-italiana>.

2.3 The Heritage Speaker between L2 and Heritage Language

For Bangladeshis living in Italy, then, both Italian and Bangla are central, the first to obtain papers or access work, the second as a Heritage Language (HL). The term Heritage Speaker (HS) is linked to the concept of HL, born in Canada, a multilingual land of both indigenous and colonisation languages, where in the 1970s the Ontario Heritage Languages programme was developed, financing a school system that would teach the HL for 2.5 hours (Aalberse, Backus, Muysken 2019, 2). The actions of the Canadian federal government then continued along these lines and, since 2006, the Heritage Ministry has implemented language policies in favour of English, French and indigenous minorities, while also giving support to other HLs – the dozens of minority languages of migrant communities (Eaton, Turin 2022, 794). The Canadian government's definition of HL is:

A mother tongue that is neither an official language, nor an indigenous [i.e. Aboriginal] language. (Aalberse, Backus, Muysken 2019, 2)

The term 'heritage' always refers to the transmission from generation to generation of patterns, beliefs and ways of living, and despite continuity with the past, the 'inheritance' is present (Aalberse, Backus, Muysken 2019, 3). HLs thus:

1. are/were originally spoken in a different place from where they are currently spoken;
2. were brought to their present location through the migration and settlement of their speakers;
3. the term itself does not refer to political or national alliances, but to historical origins, not being a threat to the integrity of the nation state;
4. no reference is made to current speaking skills, making even an identity connection with the HL of the cultural community of origin possible;⁹
5. being languages transplanted to a place where they are not dominant, the ideal of competence, authenticity and richness of expression is usually found in the country of origin (Eaton, Turin 2022, 795).

⁹ In the literature, the erosion, or attrition, of the mother tongue is often emphasised as one of the primary characteristics of HLs, especially by second generations. Lacking the necessary linguistic input, lexicon, morpho-syntactic structures and variety of registers are gradually lost: representing HL as a deficient and deficient linguistic system may, however, be counterproductive and does not consider HS in whom identity construction is central (Nagy, Celata 2022, 226).

There are different kinds of HSs: he/she may be a person whose exposure to the mother tongue (L1) is interrupted (by voluntary immigration, deportation, adoption) in conjunction with an intensive exposure to a non-mother tongue (L2). For children of immigrants, the language of the parents is often learnt at home as the minority L1, while the L2 is learnt outside the home and is the language of the majority. There are many cases and, as the community grows in generations, there tends to be a language shift, the L2 of the parents becoming the L1 of the children, who will have the parents' mother tongue as HL, until the generation when the HL is acquired in fragments and restricted to a few registers, while the language of the majority becomes these generations' mother tongue (Nagy, Celata 2022, 225). In this paper, these kinds of HSs will be analysed, taking into account the exposure to L2 and the process of learning Italian/Bangla as well as the practices and uses of L1.

3 Context: Bangladeshi Migration

Venice's migrant population accounts for about 15% of the total resident population, 39,025 immigrants present out of a total of 253,174 residents in 2022, with a higher figure compared to the Italian territory, where the total presence of foreigners accounts for 6.4% of the total number of residents. The Bangladeshi presence is the most numerous in the municipality of Venice, with 8,269 presences (5,328 men and 2,941 women),¹⁰ around 20% of the total foreign resident population.

Bangladesh was born out of independence from Pakistan in 1971 on linguistic basis. In addition to the official language, Bangla, 36 other languages are spoken.¹¹ The country faces a high poverty rate and periodic flooding caused by climate change, with water covering 8% of the territory: international migration is therefore a survival strategy for many Bangladeshis (Siddiqui 2004). Bangladesh is one of the largest migrant countries, with an estimate of 7 millions abroad by 2021.¹² Through national and international laws, Bangladeshis have always moved where they could find opportunities, in UK (the London community is one of the largest today), and in other anglophone or European countries. They entered Italy "pulled by the attraction of

10 ISTAT 2023. Data extracted on 9 January 2024 at 10:45 UTC (GMT) from I.Stat.

11 See the Ethnologue website to read more information about the languages spoken in Bangladesh, available at the following link: <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/BD/>.

12 See the the United Nation agency for migration website, namely the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), to read a report regarding Bangladeshi migrants, available at the following link: <https://bangladesh.iom.int/news/world-grows-281-million-migrants-bangladesh-6th-largest-migrant-sending-country>.

periodic amnesties for irregular migrants to legalize their status" (King, Della Puppa 2021, 408), a "permanent (or at least renewable) residence in Europe" (Knights 1996, 109). In the 1990s Bangladeshi presence started growing slowly, but with the Martelli Law (1990) a first wave of Bangladeshi migrants began, with family/parental migration, work migration and through "travel agents" who recruited Bangladeshi migrants (Knights 1996, 109). In that period, migrants were predominantly from Shariatpur, Noakhali, Komilla and Dhaka and they resided in Rome (Mantovan 2007, 286-7). Once regularised, Bangladeshi migrants began internal migration especially to the Northeast (Morad, Gombac 2018, 40). Through family reunifications and trafficking, between 2002 and 2022 the presences increased sixfold, with 150,000 regularly present,¹³ mainly concentrated in Rome and in the Veneto region (King, Della Puppa 2021, 408).

3.1 The Bangladeshi Presence in Venice

Veneto is the second Italian region for residences of foreign citizens (2002-12) with about 450,000 presences. The Bangladeshi migration to Venice from the 1990s saw men seeking work, single or married, as first migrants. They now can reach Venice: i) through internal migration; ii) with a work visa, through the *decreto flussi* (flows decree);¹⁴ iii) as asylum seekers and iv) through family reunification, once settled properly with residence permits and appropriate housing.¹⁵ According to the figures given in section 2.1 (p. 6), 65% of migrants are men and 35% women: in 20 years, the female presence has risen from 14% to 35%, a sign of an increase in long-term residents and mature migration.

13 Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy Report *The Bangladeshi community in Italy 2022*.

14 The legislative decree known as the *decreto flussi* sets "the maximum number (so-called quotas) of foreign citizens from non-EU countries who may enter Italy from abroad each year to work is defined in the so-called flows decree. The decree provides for separate entry quotas for seasonal workers, self-employed workers and non-seasonal employed workers. Quotas are also set for converting residence permits issued for study reasons into work or for converting residence permits issued for seasonal work into non-seasonal employment" (see the Italian Minister of Work and Social Politics website to read the full regulations of the flow decree, available at the following link: <https://integrazioneimmigranti.gov.it/it-it/Ricerca-news/Dettaglio-news/id/2213/Che-cose-il-Decreto-Flussi-Cosa-si-intende-per-quote-di-ingresso>).

15 The legislation for family reunification requires residence permits of a certain duration, housing eligibility and a minimum income. Moreover, not all family members can be reunited: mainly wife and children under 18 (see the Italian Minister of the Interior website to read the regulations regarding family reunification, available at the following link: <https://prefettura.interno.gov.it/it/prefetture/trapani/ricongiungimento-familiare>).

As of 2010, the main areas of birth among Bangladeshi immigrants in Venice were the districts of Shariatpur, Dhaka and Kishoreganj. The presence in the municipality of Venice is concentrated in the centre of Mestre and the mainland (64%), 32% are in Marghera and Chirignago and 4% in Venice. The minors are 23.7% of the total: in 2018, in three schools in the municipality (two in Mestre and one in Marghera) Bangladeshi children were more than 50% and among the 890 requests for mediation in schools (2019-20), 60% (531) were for Bangla (Bonesso 2020).

Unlike other areas of Veneto where industry in the narrow sense has created the greatest attraction, migrants from Venice and Mestre are employed in the area's most profitable activities: catering (dishwashers, kitchen helpers, cooks), tourism-related activities (housekeepers, waiters/waitresses in hotels and B&Bs, receptionists, porter service), entrepreneurship and shipbuilding in Marghera. In fact, Fincantieri was one of the first attractions in the Venetian municipality, where around 3,000 Bangladeshis by 2021 were employed in the "mansioni più pesanti e dequalificate" (heaviest and most de-skilled jobs) (Mantovan 2007, 288).

In 2021, there were about 250 businesses run by Bangladeshi in the historic centre alone, often low-priced industrial souvenir shops in the most tourist areas. In Mestre, one mainly finds grocery shops with typical South Asian products, government office for tax assistance and information that deal with documents and bureaucracy mainly for compatriots, money transfers and other services (sometimes all in the same shop). These activities are mainly concentrated in the areas where Bangladeshi people live (many do not have a driving licence or a car), in the streets adjacent to the train station, in the centre of Mestre, and in the main market, expanding the choices to Bangladeshi fruits and vegetables.

The salary of the Bangladeshi workers must be enough to support themselves and their family here in Italy, paying very high rents that are often increased for foreigners, especially around Mestre centre, which is why it is common for a Bangladeshi family to be forced to live in one room, sharing a house with other families. The money earned is often used to send a livelihood to the family in the country of origin, to relatives of the extended family, and in the case of wealthier families to do charitable work for the poorest in the village, as this Bangladeshi interviewee states:

Quel periodo là mia famiglia economicamente era ottimo quel periodo perché avevamo lavorato tutti in Germania in Svizzera

[...] Là abbiamo aiutato sempre i poveri da quando arrivato in Europa [...] della zona.¹⁶

4 Research Questions and Methodology

This paper will answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic composition of Venice and of the Bangladeshi community?
2. What are the practices and ideas regarding Italian and Bangla?
3. What is the point of view of women and which peculiar difficulties are they facing?

A qualitative method was used in a sociolinguistic research study with ethnographic method, with informal and formal meetings, interviews, chats with participants and field observations of Bangladeshis living, working and/or studying in the municipality of Venice, thus including Mestre and Marghera. Approximately from May 2023 to September 2024, 20 semi-structured interviews were carried out and recorded in Mestre and Marghera with 15 participants (some participants were interviewed more than once) with migratory background from Bangladesh of different ages, genders and generations recruiting interviewees through the snowball method, mainly through key informants. In addition, informal conversations with several people of different ages and genders were carried on. In conjunction with the work in the field, visits to schools and places of interest, and meetings with informants, a field diary was written, with the issues discussed with the people, impressions, observations.

The semi-structured interview is constructed on the two main topics of interest, subdivided into a first introductory part of questions to frame the personal and migrant situation of the interviewee and a second part concerning more specifically the languages of the repertoire, their use and importance (for parents, if they wish to teach Bangla to their children) and the means through which they learned Italian. At the beginning, the specific themes of the research study were about the process of learning Italian and the maintenance of Bangla as a Heritage Language. While going on with interviews, precisely through a semi-structured method, it came out that other issues were important within the research study and were entangled

16 "That time there my family economically was very good that time because we had all worked in Germany in Switzerland [...] There we have always helped the poor since I came to Europe [...] in the area (Interviewee no. 1, Italian, man, over 50 years old, in Italy for more than 20 years)".

to the main topics, since many people had a really limited knowledge of Italian or were struggling to learn it:

- Which difficulties are you facing to learn Italian?
- How do you think it is a necessity to learn Italian?
- Which problems have you faced/Which events happened because you did not know Italian?

The interviews were carried out either in Italian (where possible), in English, Bangla, Hindi or a mixture of these languages. In each excerpt, the interviewee is given a number (in chronological order), then the language of the interview is indicated, along with gender, age, generation or years of presence in Italy. To preserve the linguistic characteristics of the interviewees, the interviews were transcribed faithfully to the spoken word, preserving any grammatical errors.

5 Data

Different issues/theme were identified coding the transcribed interviews and four main themes/issues were selected for a wider analysis in this specific paper:

1. The Italian learning process: challenges and necessities
2. The specific difficulties of women
3. Bangla as an HL
4. Other languages of the repertoire: English

5.1 The Italian Learning Process: Challenges and Necessities

1. Actually, right now, I'm not only studying. I'm working plus studying. And I have to take the load that tomorrow I have to go work. And I don't have enough time to do this study. [...] In the starting, it was very hard for me. I was very tired at that moment. I couldn't concentrate. Because if you're going to learn something new, you have to be concentrated. (Interviewee no. 3, English, young man, newly-arrived)
2. So, they only know Bangladeshi. So, they only communicate with Bangladeshi people. [...] Venice has lots of Bangladeshis. So, it's not hard to only communicate with Bangladeshi and survive there. (Interviewee no. 3, English, young man, newly-arrived)
3. Let's say I'm going to stay in Italy 10 years. In between 10 years, I can be sick. Very horrible way. And what about... it's a workplace. No one is going to give me his available time. I have to take care of myself. (Interviewee no. 3, English, young man, newly-arrived)

4. For the survival. It's very necessary. (Interviewee no. 3, English, young man, newly-arrived)
5. Ti racconto la vita di un bengalese. Il bengalese viene in Italia. Lavora a Fincantieri, lavora nella ristorazione, quindi ha... Va là, ritorna, non ha nessun contatto con lo stato italiano, con le persone italiane. (Interviewee no. 4, Italian, man, second generation)¹⁷
6. Quando lui era cinque mesi io ho lasciato il divano perché lui sempre come così dormire [...] Anche lui è caduto, anche è arrivato il sangue nel naso, subito ho chiamato ambulanza e ho andato in ospedale, non chiamano mio marito perché mio marito lavorava. (Interviewee no. 5, Italian, woman and mother of 2, in Italy for more than 5 years)¹⁸
7. Noi sempre sempre lanciamo una notizia che novo arrivi donne omini devono imparare lingua italiana, donne loro devono andare dei medico allora devono parlare da soli, devono andare iscola dai bambini, devono parlare con l'insegnante con- am- amici della iscola dai g- con gli altri genitori allora se tu hai qualche problemi con tua figlio con tua figlia con altri figli se tu non riesci parlare non riesci spiegare quale probleme che hanno questi figli che litigano [...] se tu no sai niente lingua italiana come fai collegare con i altri genitori come fai spiegare ehm- altri genitori quale problemi che avete tra le bambini? (Interviewee no. 1, Italian, man, over 50 years old, in Italy for more than 20 years)¹⁹
8. Tre-quattro cose noi sempre insegniamo per primo a loro quelli novo arrivi quelli che vengono qui per imparare lingua italiana, quella abbiamo visto che senza lingua italiana diffiscile integrarsi qui questo paese. (Interviewee no. 1, Italian, man, over 50 years old, in Italy for more than 20 years)²⁰

17 "I'll tell you how the life of a Bengali is. The Bengali comes to Italy. He works in Fincantieri, he works in catering, so he... He goes there, he comes back, he has no contact with the Italian State, with Italian people".

18 "When he was five months I left him on the couch because he always sleeps like this [...] he also fell, also came blood in the nose, immediately I called the ambulance and I went to the hospital, I didn't call my husband because he was working".

19 "We always send a news that new arrivals women men they must learn Italian language, they have to go to the doctor so they have to speak alone, they have to go to the school of the children, they have to speak with teacher with friends of the school with other parents so if you have some problems with you daughter with your son they fight [...] if you know nothing of Italian language how can you connect with other parents how can you explain ehm- other parents what problem there is between children?".

20 "Three-four things we always teach them first those new arrivals who come here to learn Italian, that we have seen that without the Italian language it is difficult to integrate here in this country".

9. Nell'altro paese dell'Europa quando tu entri un paese prima di tutto tu devi imparare quella lingua là no? obbligo no? in Italia non è obbligo. (Interviewee no. 1, Italian, man, over 50 years old, in Italy for more than 20 years)²¹
10. Io ho a che fare sempre con adulti e quindi il fatto è che loro si sono proprio impostati all'idea che una volta che hai smesso di studiare è difficile riprendere. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)²²
11. [...] partono dal presupposto che l'italiano è impossibile. Non difficile, è impossibile. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)²³
12. Perché poi dice, intanto mi serve il documento, ora che ho il documento ho tempo di imparare, però dopo il tempo non arriva... (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)²⁴

5.2 Women's challenges

1. In Bangladesh anche la famiglia di musulmani loro pensa che donne non lavora fuori di casa e uomo sì [...] mia famiglia un po' mentalità un po' di differente, mia mentalità un po' differente di altri perché non è che è una donna, non è che è una femmina io devo migliorare la mia vita perché io voglio la mia vita migliore. (interviewee no. 2, Italian, young woman, in Italy for less than 5 years)²⁵
2. Bangladeshi donne non è forte come italiani [...] tante persone mia *sanskṛti* dice no no va bene che una donna va un altro paese sola sola e questa non è una cultura di mia- in Bangladesh non funziona bene. (Interviewee no. 2, Italian, young woman, in Italy for less than 5 years)²⁶

21 "In the other countr[ies] of Europe when you enter a country first of all you have to learn that language yes? [it is] mandatory yes? In Italy it is not mandatory".

22 "I always deal with adults so the fact is that they've convinced themselves that once you've stopped studying it's hard to restart".

23 "They presume that Italian is impossible. Not difficult, impossible".

24 "Because then they say, now I need the paper, once I have the paper I have time to learn, but then the time never comes...".

25 "In Bangladesh even the family of Muslims they think women don't work outside the house and man does [...] my family a little bit different mentality, my mentality a little bit different than others because it's not that she is a woman, it's not that she is a female I have to improve my life because I want my life better".

26 "Bangladeshi women is not as strong as Italians [...] so many people my *sanskṛti* (culture) say no no it is good that a woman goes another country alone alone and this is not a culture of my- in Bangladesh it does not work well".

3. Devo imparare prima italiano dopo cerco lavoro. (Interviewee no. 2, Italian, young woman, in Italy for less than 5 years)²⁷
4. Perché il loro ruolo fondamentale è la gestione totale della casa, della famiglia che è veramente un impegno grandissimo che a volte sembra, almeno io lo vedo in questo modo, più dell'uomo che lavora fuori. Quindi anche loro si trovano in una situazione molto... dicono sono stanca, non ce la faccio. Poi magari tendono a dire guarda io non so la lingua, come faccio ad aiutarti? Quindi anche loro si trovano in una brutta situazione. Quindi non posso dare la colpa a loro. (Interviewee no. 6, Italian, young mother of 2, second generation)²⁸
5. Ho imparato ita- l'italiano tanti anni dopo, tanti anni dopo perché ehm-- erano non è così davvero, adesso ci sono tanti posti perché da- di imparare e perché non ho conosciuto tante scuole, tante persone [...] perché adesso ci sono tanti bengalesi [...] per quello ho imparato piano piano [...] perché non c'è internet anche. (Interviewee no. 7, Italian, mother of 2 and Italian teacher, in Italy for almost 20 years)²⁹
6. Ecco perché ora ho voglia di studiare qua, perché quando sono venuta qua [2006] è nato mio filio e poi un'altra filia quindi no? Bisogno tanto tempo come una mamma, adesso sento un po' libera. (Interviewee no. 7, Italian, mother of 2 and Italian teacher, in Italy for almost 20 years)³⁰
7. Here you need language for everything such as going to the doctor, my child is little, if she needs to see a doctor my husband has to take time off but he can't take time off all the time. (Interviewee no. 8, Bangla and Hindi, recently arrived mother of 2)³¹
8. This month I have an appointment to the doctor on the 23rd how can I explain the problem if I don't know the language, so I have to take him [with me] because he knows Italian [...]

27 "I have to learn Italian first, then I look for a job".

28 "Because their fundamental role is the total management of the house, of the family that is really a great task that sometimes it seems, at least I see it this way, much more than the man who works outside. So they also find themselves in such a situation... they say I'm tired, I can't. Then they might say look, I don't know the language, how can I help you? So they also find themselves in a bad situations. So I can't blame them".

29 "I learned Italian so many years later, so many years later because ehm-- they were not like that really, now there are so many places because it gives-- to learn and because I did not know so many schools, so many people [...] because now there are so many Bengalis [...] that's why I learned slowly [...] because there is no internet also".

30 "That's why I feel like studying here now, because when I came here [2006] my son was born and then another daughter so no? I need so much time as a mother, now I feel a bit free"

31 The excerpts 7, 8 and 9 were translated from Bangla by a collaborator of the project.

whenever I go to whichever office, when they ask questions, I don't understand anything, so I can't answer, if I knew the language [...] I've had many problems when I went to the hospital here. I'm very good in my language but I don't speak Italian, I've suffered a lot because I couldn't explain my pain and my problems. (Interviewee no. 8, Bangla and Hindi, recently arrived mother of 2)

9. Soon after I arrived in Italy, I signed up for a [Provincial Adult Education Centre] language learning course, but I didn't finish it. I was out of school for a long time because my son was sick most of the time and I couldn't even take the exams so I couldn't complete the course. For those of us who are mothers of young children in Italy, I wish that if the Italian government had taken steps to allow us to learn the language with our children, I think many mothers would have learned the language. (Interviewee no. 8, Bangla and Hindi, recently arrived mother of 2)

5.3 Bangla as an HL

1. Ho visto un po' di familia che bambini che nato qui che no parlava bene le regole no? E allora poi mi è venuto mente che guarda ce questi bambini non parlano bene la lingua se hanno con i genitori i-in Bangladesh loro non riescono parlare con loro parenti, loro cugini, loro nonni no-non riescono a parlare perché loro dimenticato bangla, oppure loro non sanno bangla per questo mi è venuto mente che una rilasione con i parenti si chiudeno se loro non imparano questi bengoli quale lingua madre, lingua madre [...] se loro no parlano questa lingua perdono tutto. (Interviewee no. 1, Italian, man, over 50 years old, in Italy for more than 20 years)³²
2. Devono conservare la mia lingua perché è l'unica lingua al mondo che ha dov- è- è stata ottenuto in seguito a una s- come dire [massacro] quindi l'uni- l'unico popolo che ha lottato per avere la sua lingua madrelingua quindi hanno il sacro s- dovere di continuare a mantenere questa lingua in casa sua [...] quello che mi- mi fa sentire un po' inferiore è che noi non sappiamo la nostra lingua, non sappiamo la

32 "I saw some family that children born here that didn't speak the rules well no? And then it came to my mind that these children don't speak the language well if they speak with their parents in Bangladesh they can't speak with their relatives, their cousins, their grandparents can't speak because they forgot Bangla, or they don't know Bangla that's why it came to my mind that a relationship with relatives is shut down if they don't learn this language, the mother tongue [...] if they don't speak this language they lose everything".

- grammatica. (Interviewee no. 9, Italian, young man, second generation)³³
3. Molto importante perché loro sono stati otto ore in classe sempre parlano italiano non c'è problema niente io non ho paura con l'italiano perché loro sempre va fuori a parlare italiano anche a scuola italiana bangla no, bangla solo con mio marito. (Interviewee no. 5, Italian, woman and mother of 2, in Italy for more than 5 years)³⁴
 4. Io l'ho imparata un po' a voce dai miei genitori. Che comunque fino alla mia adolescenza non riuscivo a esprimerla bene, perché, cioè li mescolavo un po'. Non riuscivo a dire delle parole dirette. Quindi ho sempre mescolato, perché non riuscivo a formare una frase corretta in modo giusto. È stato sempre un po' difficile. Infatti parlavamo sempre quasi in italiano. Tranne con mio papà e mia mamma, ma i miei fratelli, io... (Interviewee no. 6, Italian, young mother of 2, second generation)³⁵
 5. Però gli insegno anche il bengalese, un po', quello che so io, diciamo. Perché secondo me se riesco a introdurre anche quel poco che so io, è molto interessante la cosa. (Interviewee no. 6, Italian, young mother of 2, second generation)³⁶
 6. Io sto cercando di...è difficile per me lasciare l'italiano ma mi sto impost... cioè mi impongo di parlare in italiano... parlare in bengalese. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)³⁷
 7. Cioè in senso io ancora adesso se mi dici di parlare in italiano la parlo meglio del bangla. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)³⁸

33 "They have to preserve my language because it is the only language in the world that had to- it was obtained as a result of a s- how to say [massacre] so the only- the only people that fought to have their native language so they have the sacred s- duty to continue to keep this language at home [...] what makes me feel a little bit inferior is that we don't know our language, we don't know the grammar".

34 "[It is] very important because they have been in class eight hours they always speak Italian there's no problem I'm not scared with Italian because they always go out and talk in Italian also in Italian school Bangla no, Bangla only with my husband"

35 "I've learnt it verbally a little through my parents. Anyways, until my adolescence I couldn't express it well, because, well I mixed them a little. I couldn't say direct words. So I've always mixed, because I couldn't assemble a correct sentence in the right way. It's always been a little difficult. In fact we would almost always speak in Italian. Except for my dad and my mum, but my brothers, me..."

36 "But I will teach them Bengali as well, a little, the things I know, let's say. Because in my opinion, if I can introduce even the little that I know, it's very interesting".

37 "I'm trying to... it's difficult for me to leave Italian but I'm convinc- like I'm forcing myself to speak Italian... speak in Bengali".

38 "Like I mean I now if you tell me to speak Italian I speak it better than Bangla".

8. I miei hanno sempre parlato in bengalese, cioè loro parlano italiano ma con noi in famiglia no. Quando eravamo più piccoli, ed è una cosa comune in tutte le famiglie, parlare in bengalese con mamma e papà e parlare in italiano tra i fratelli. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)³⁹
9. Poi mia mamma ad una certa ci ha imposto: "Parlate in bengalese che imparate entrambi". E quindi abbiamo imparato. Adesso parliamo un misto. Un misto italiano. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)⁴⁰
10. E invece con lei io ci tengo che impari, cioè in senso comunque ci tengo che tutta la cultura resti, però ovviamente l'italiano arriverà da sé. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)⁴¹
11. Stiamo parlando bangla perché sappiamo che a scuola imparerà l'italiano [...] devono sapere almeno leggere e scrivere, leggere i nomi dei prodotti, gli indirizzi, parlare con i nonni. (Interviewee no. 11, Italian, woman in her 30s, in Italy for more than 10 years)⁴²

5.4 Other Languages of the Repertoire: English

1. Perché così non sono bilingue, ma anche trilingue. Poi ci saranno altre lingue che si aggiungeranno. (Interviewee no. 6, Italian, young mother of 2, second generation)⁴³
2. [...] e con Alexa di farle sentire cose in inglese [...] Cioè sono troppo abituata all'italiano però vorrei imputarmi io sul bengalese e sull'inglese. L'italiano lo impara. (Interviewee no. 10, Italian, young mother of newborn, second generation)⁴⁴

39 "My parents have always spoken in Bengali, like, they speak Italian but with us within the family they wouldn't. When we were younger, and it is something common in every family, to speak in Bengali with mom and dad and to speak in Italian among siblings".

40 "Then my mum at a certain point forced us: 'Speak in Bengali so you'll both learn'. So we've learnt. Now we speak a mixture. A mixture of Italian".

41 "Instead with her I care that she learns, like I mean in any case I care that all the culture remains, but obviously the Italian will come by itself".

42 "We're speaking in Bangla because we know that at school [he] will learn Italian [...] they at least have to know how to read and write, read the names of the products, the addresses, speak with the grandparents".

43 "Because then they won't be bilingual, but also trilingual. Then there will be other languages that will be added".

44 "[...] and with Alexa to make her hear things in English [...] Like I'm too used to Italian but I'd like to focus on Bengali and English. [Of course] she will learn Italian".

3. Un po' di persone, sì 3-400 persone, che andato in Inghilterra. (Interviewee no. 1, Italian, man, over 50 years old, in Italy for more than 20 years)⁴⁵

6 Discussion

6.1 The Italian Learning Process: Challenges and Necessities

Being one of the poorest countries in the world, many Bangladeshis migrates to earn money for them and for their families, both in Italy and abroad. The continuous number of arrivals, especially through the *decreto flussi*, poses several challenges both to migrants who do not know the Italian language and to those that deal with a first literacy in Italian. For many men, it is really difficult to learn Italian since their work duties condition their opportunities and their energies to learn Italian (excerpt no. 1 § 4.1). Apart from the material opportunities, like time, to learn a language, motivation plays a crucial role in language learning (Dörnyei 1998, 117). Work and the improvement of their status and conditions are the primary goals of the Bangladeshis, and at the same time the attitude towards the Italian learning process is negative, resulting in a low interest/intrinsic motive of learning Italian (excerpts nos 5, 10-11 § 4.1; Dörnyei 1998, 128). In addition to the focus on work, the vast community of Venice lowers the interest and the necessity of learning Italian (excerpt no. 2 § 4.1).

At the same time, there are many reasons and motivations to learn Italian, starting from emergencies, in the hospitals or in other situations where there is the need to speak Italian since no one speaks Bangla, nor English. Many interviewees pointed that there is the need to learn at least the basics of Italian for this reason (excerpts nos 3, 5 § 4.1). In front of this challenges and needs, different interviewees think that the most important thing once entering Italy should be language, to learn all the basics for survival in the host society, and that a course should be mandatory, as it is in other European countries such as Germany (excerpts nos 7-9 § 4.1).

In this sense, the work of associations and institutions is essential to make possible a first, basic communication in Italian and to teach how to deal with the problems of migration in a foreign country. In many of these classes, preA1-B1 Italian language courses are held, for women and men of different nationalities (even if in many areas the majority is Bangladeshi), but also specifically for women, minors

45 "A few people, yes 3-400 people, who went to England".

and particularly vulnerable learners (such as during pregnancy, etc.). These courses are mainly held by governmental school, private associations or are funded by different institutions. The goal of one of the associations that were interviewed is to decrease the distance between Italians and Bangladeshi immigrants through language and to foster inclusion, so that over time Bangladeshis in Mestre and Venice can do more skilled and qualified jobs, entering the Venetian social fabric (excerpts nos 7-8 § 4.1). It also emerged that the lack of knowledge of Italian by one partner has consequences on the work schedule of the other partner, who needs to take time off work (excerpts nos 7, § 4.1).

6.2 Women's Challenges

In addition to the arrivals to *decreto flussi*, and to the problem faced by men concerning duties, responsibilities and work schedules, the presence of Bangladeshi people is considerably growing thanks to family reunification, particularly of women. In December 2022 a Bangladeshi woman was beaten for wearing the *niqāb*, a veil that covers a woman's entire body.⁴⁶ In addition to the difficulties of migrating in a different country, Bangladeshi women are a particularly vulnerable group for being women, muslim and migrant at the same time.

The excerpts nos 1 and 2 (§ 4.2) give an idea of what social expectations are there for women. This leads to a strong division between public and private, male and female, home/family and work: the *pardā* (literally 'curtain') is the practice that – especially in the Indian Subcontinent and Islamic countries – prevents the man from seeing the woman, thus drawing a 'curtain' both physical (*hijāb*, physical segregation of the genders) and metaphorical, but which plays an equally important role in intensifying the spatial division and disparity between the genders, limiting women's personal, work and social activities, relegating them to the domestic sphere (see Lata, Walters, Roitman 2021). The institution of marriage – in most cases arranged – leads to viripatrilocality, i.e. the bride's residence in her husband's family, on which the woman depends, also economically. Once emigrated, often through family reunification, the gender gap continues, with the woman being dependent on her husband in every sphere of the public sphere, also for language (excerpt no. 7 § 4.2).

One of the numbers that stands out the most in the figures of Bangladeshi presence is the male-female ratio of the Bangladeshi

⁴⁶ See the article from the online newspaper *Today* to read the full news, available at the following link: <https://www.today.it/cronaca/ragazza-picchiata-velo-niqab-mestre.html>.

presence: 5,328 men versus 2,941 women (see § 2.1). Coming to Italy through family reunification means coming several years after their husbands, who already know some basics of Italian language, since men often work with Italians or, regardless, are more present in Venetian social life. They are able to learn the language more quickly because of a greater linguistic input, albeit at a basic level and limited to work, bureaucratic and children's schooling needs. Once arrived in Italy, many Bangladeshi women get pregnant or they have to take charge of domestic work, childcare, cooking, housework, without the joint family's support they used to have in the native country (excerpts nos 4-6 § 4.2).

There are few women engaged in work, they remain more isolated and Italian language input is reduced, often zero, given also the possibility of access to services (such as groceries) managed by compatriots. Even if many women are starting working, also with small jobs that they can do within the house, in the cleaning sector or in the healthcare, but surely the opportunities they have to learn Italian and to speak with Italians are fewer than for Bangladeshi men, creating a particular situation of vulnerability and marginalization (Tonioli 2022, 269-70). In some cases, women start working or studying when their children become more independent, even after many years after coming to Italy (excerpt no. 5 § 4.2).

These practices can create particular difficulties for women when they emigrate to a foreign country whose language and culture they neither speak nor know, thus they do not have the tools to create their own living space outside the home and to settle in, nor can they be autonomous at pivotal moments such as pregnancy, during which there may be emergencies or particular difficulties that cannot always be mediated through the husband (excerpts nos 7-8 § 4.2)

Associations in the area, CPIAs (Provincial Centres for Education of Adults) and municipal initiatives are committed to creating courses specifically for women to teach not only Italian but also health elements related to the sexual sphere and to the reproductive system, to help them deal with problems related to pregnancy, motherhood, hygiene, postpartum issues and the schooling of their children. The reasons set out above, however, make self-determination, including linguistic self-determination, difficult, especially when there is no continuous support network that can cover all women, even the most vulnerable, but only courses linked to municipal and European funds.⁴⁷ In this

47 A teacher refers to several FAMI (Fondo Asilo Migrazione e Integrazione) projects, which are used to create specific language courses for women. One of these, V.O.C.I. of 2021, can be found on the website of the municipality of Venice. See the website of the Venetian municipality to read more about the language courses funded by FAMI at the following link: <https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/convegno-finale-2021-progetto-fami-voci>.

sense, one must bear in mind the material difficulties related to the possibility of having linguistic input suitable for learning Italian that migrant women may have, as well as the time they have to devote to housework (excerpts nos 4, 9 § 4.2).

Nonetheless, not for all women the situation is the same, but this often depends on family status, immediate needs and, of course, circumstances. As for the excerpts nos 1 and 3 (§ 4.2), learning Italian was for this interviewee a way to be able to enter the Italian social fabric more easily, as well as to increase her working possibilities.

6.3 **Bangla, ‘the Language of the Heart’**

An Italian teacher, during an informal conversation, stated that Bangladeshis only speak and hear the “language of the heart”, that is Bangla, their mother tongue and also the HL. There are many opportunities to speak Bangla, since the community is one of the biggest in Italy. On the other hand, while the community keeps growing, many children are born in Italy and attend Italian school, with a greater Italian input than their parents, they are starting losing their competence in Bangla (Nagy, Celata 2022, 225). Having seen this problem, many schools in Mestre were founded to teach Bangla in a scholastic way to the children of Bangladeshis born in Italy, who have an identity bond to the language and who can communicate with their relatives in Bangladesh or in other countries (excerpt no. 1 § 4.3). Many parents state that keeping Bangla alive is vital for their children (excerpts nos 3, 5-6, 10-11 § 4.3), but also the second generation recognises its importance (excerpt no. 2 § 4.3).

If, for what concerns the first generation, the opportunities to speak and hear Italian are scarce, in the second generation there is a shift, beginning right from childhood with the experience with the siblings, and the input and the competences in the HL diminish (excerpts nos 4, 6-9 § 4.3), also creating new varieties mixing Bangla with Italian (excerpt no. 9 § 4.3). Nonetheless, they recognise the importance of handing down the heritage to their children, the third generation (excerpt no. 10 § 4.3).

6.4 **‘... But Also Trilingual’: Other Languages of the Repertoire**

Another issue to highlight that influences language practices is that in several cases Italy is seen as a “transit” country to reach the most desirable destination, the UK (excerpt no. 3 § 4.4). This is called onward migration (Della Puppa 2021, 36). The English attraction certainly relates to the desire to join the old Bangladeshi community

in London, which is seen as subject to less racism than the Italian one, but also to the state aid:

Bedi qui Italia che sono immigrati che bibeba da 20 anni 30 anni che vive qui dopo prende scittadinanza se ne va via? perché? [...] perché in Italia non c'è una social service non c'è.⁴⁸ (Interviewee no. 1, Italian, man, over 50 years old, in Italy for more than 20 years)

The view of the United Kingdom (or other European countries) as richer in possibilities and aid therefore prompts emigration again, along with the possibility of investing in the children's future (Della Puppa, Morad 2019, 481). The inability to educate and socialise their children in English is a problem for Bangladeshis, who would be more oriented towards a "globalised and cosmopolitan dimension" (Della Puppa, Morad 2019, 481). Such is the importance given to English that Italian (and linguistic input in Italian) is often neglected: many of the participants in Tonioli's study (2022, 278-9) in fact considered English to be the key to their children's future, influencing ideologies and linguistic behaviour within the Bangladeshi family and also losing out on access to Italian cultural heritage and exchange processes. On the other hand, many interviewees highlighted the importance of having a wider linguistic repertoire, while not neglecting the education of Bangla and Italian (excerpts nos 1-2 § 4.4). When (and if) migrating to the UK, then, the linguistic repertoire, the dominance and in general the linguistic heritage might change again, as well as the context, the motivation and other factors, as can be seen in Goglia's studies (2021; 2023).

7 Conclusions

In this first insight on the features Bangladeshi community of Venice, it was portrayed how diversified the composition of this same community is, with differences according to gender, social status (and opportunities) and generation. Many Bangladeshi people realise the importance of learning Italian, surely for emergencies but also to enter in the social and work fabric of the country. On one hand, men are facing the challenges of having many responsibilities and work duties and they must subtract their energy from the study of Italian language to work and earn as much money as possible for their family. On the other hand for women the opportunities to learn

48 "See here Italy who are immigrants who lived for 20 years 30 years living here after they take citizenship they leave? why? [...] because in Italy there is no social service there is not".

Italian are scarce: their burden is more invisible than men's but still it conditions their possibilities to learn Italian and speak in Italian with people. Surely Italian is a necessity for them 'for survival' (excerpt no. 4 § 4.1) but the many difficulties and challenges they face make them vulnerable learners.

For what concerns Bangla, there is a positive attitude towards HL for first generations as well as for second and third generations, creating a transnational bond (with relatives, etc.). Creating a wider repertoire and shaping also the linguistic landscape of Venice, English is the language that covers all the communities and sometimes it makes possible to communicate without using Italian.

In this landscape, the diversity of the city should be taken as a positive feature that creates, according to the Faro Convention, the possibility to understand the more widely Heritage, both of the hosting country and of the migrants in the territory. All the languages in the municipality should be considered important for the different communities, as Bangla is for Bangladeshis, giving it space within the municipality as part of the Heritage, while working on the motivation to learn Italian, creating the conditions to increase the opportunities and integrating specific policies for multilingualism and the protection of minority languages in the current legislation.

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