

Marriage Preparation in the Muslim Community

Rehana Ismail, Birmingham

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Introduction

Rehana worked as a sister in the ophthalmic unit in Birmingham and later as an ophthalmic nurse educator. Her head covering attire meant that she was easily identifiable as a muslim. As such, relatives would approach to ask if she knew of any suitable colleagues who were looking for potential spouses. An example would be : “Sister Rehana, you must know a lot of healthcare workers in your hospital. Can you find someone for our daughter?”

The talks with the patients and visitors were heartbreaking. Having left their home country abroad and settled in UK meant that most of the people could no longer enjoy the matchmaking network provided in their country. They had exhausted their families and friends in searching for potential spouses and now looked upon outsiders who could assist and support them on their quest.

Rehana’s response was to offer a matchmaking event for young muslim women and men in the West Midlands, followed by a pre-marriage course. She quickly realised the need to approach this in a more formal way, always with the knowledge and consent of the parents of the young people concerned. To date over 60 such events have been held, principally in the Birmingham area.

Rehana gave up her work as an ophthalmic nurse educator in order to focus on developing programmes to support and help the muslim community. She and her husband, Mohamed, do this work without remuneration.

A. Matchmaking events

Origins and programme development

These matchmaking events started in 2004 with the Birmingham Central Mosque and in 2018 at the Al Abbasi Centre, Birmingham. It was felt from the outset that the mosque needed to be involved to help those looking for potential spouses to settle down for a harmonious family life. Sharing practice by coordinating with other mosques is also important.

During lockdown, Rehana delivered events virtually via Zoom to ensure that those looking were catered for. While a modest fee is normally charged for in-person events, virtual events were offered without charge.

Aims

- To provide an environment acceptable to the muslim males and females looking for spouses, their parents/guardians and the mosque authorities and scholars
- To support them on their journey so they can settle down to family life and enjoy a happy marriage
- To share practice with others
- To provide mandatory training for volunteers.

Objectives

- To provide a safe and acceptable environment for young people to meet their potential spouses
- To provide space for meetings
- To accommodate the parents/guardians in compliance with the Islamic principles
- To involve the mosque scholars to ensure that the events are seen as acceptable
- To support those looking and their families by providing YouTube/Zoom presentations on specific topics of their journey in searching for a potential spouse
- To share practice with other mosques
- To provide a training programme for volunteers in order to support them in their roles.

Target beneficiaries

- Those looking for potential spouses
- The parents/guardians
- The community in general.

Format

- Each matchmaking event is for a group of young people, limiting numbers to 50 men and 50 women plus their parents. They always take place in a mosque with a scholar present. The participants looking for potential spouses are advised to bring up to two guests, normally parents/guardians, with them.
- Parents/guardians are also invited to attend. They are seated in another area where they can interact with scholars who provide a special programme for them on subjects pertaining to marriage.
- The event consists of two sessions – a morning and an afternoon session with a break for prayers, and lunch in between sessions. The morning session is for ice breaking, discussions being topic based on aspects of marriage, in groups of 10. Topics would include for example, sharing domestic chores; finances; use of social media; sharing of images; balancing the emotions of those searching and their families; as well as more light hearted subjects. Sometimes more serious topics such as marrying divorcees are discussed.
- The morning session also gives the participants an opportunity to decide who they wish to meet in the afternoon session on a one to one basis with or without parents/guardians. In the afternoons parents/guardians can join in.
- What happens next, after the match-making event, is up to each family though the young people are strongly advised not to meet alone with each other in any setting. Some families might be in touch with Rehana again if the first contact didn't work out, in which case she would exchange contacts once she knew that both families were willing.
- Aftercare is important as some people may want to connect with others but do not manage to get contact details. A nominated person is designated to provide this service.

Reflections and feedback

- Rehana is pleased to note via phone calls that some marriages have taken place. She continues to support these groups who otherwise would find it difficult to meet.
- Muslim families (parents, guardians and young people) often come to the events as a last resort, when they are unable to find suitable potential spouses through family contacts.
- Comments received from participants have included, for example, 'Thank you, Aunty, for putting these events on for us'.

Wider dissemination

In one instance, Clifton Road mosque in Birmingham offered some matchmaking services via WhatsApp/phone without face to face interaction and on an individual basis. The group responsible was called Birmingham Matchmaking Forum, a sub committee of the mosque. Rehana worked with them to streamline and enhance the service through events where a group of young men and women could come together in the mosque with their families to support them, and with the scholars present. For example the Forum ran a one day pre-marriage course in November 2022 entitled 'Marriage by Design' (see poster below).

Of course, the problem of finding suitable spouses is not confined to the UK. It also exists in many regions abroad.

Rehana visited Toronto, Canada in July 2019 on the invitation of NASIMCO (North America Shia Ithnasheri Muslim Communities) to share her practice and present an event, involving both training and delivery. Approaches have been made by mosques in Paris and East Africa to provide the same service.

Criteria for sharing practice include a mandatory training session for volunteers covering both theory and practice. All matchmaking events must be conducted in a mosque venue with at least one scholar present.

In such instances support is given in the form of YouTube sessions and Zoom and TV presentations. Other invited guests were approached to share their experiences in this way. For example, a session via Zoom was offered in November 2020 through the Africa Federation Tabligh Board, (AFTAB), Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

YouTube sessions have included:

- The search for a soulmate: Unravelling the Spiritual, Emotional, & Mental Aspects of the Journey
- Matchmaking in the 21st century
- Shia Spouse: Intelligent Matchmaking <https://youtu.be/fAmf34AkZVc>

The Birmingham matchmaking forum presents

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B. Pre-marriage courses

Background

During matchmaking events, it was noticed that those attending included more divorcees. Talking to these divorcees brought the knowledge that no preparation nor any support prior to marriage was offered. Marriages were mainly focused on the wedding preparations and glitter.

Aims

- To equip the couples with the necessary tools for a successful marital life
- To signpost for further support if required
- To assess the course among the muslim community

Objectives

- To test the acceptability of the course among muslim couples
- To analyze the feasibility of implementing this course for the muslim community
- To see if any changes to the model are needed to reflect the Islamic culture and values.
- To evaluate the implementation of the tools of the course after two years.

Target beneficiaries

- The couples
- Parents/guardians/extended families of both parties
- The community and the country

Research and programme development

Rehana searched online for pre-marriage courses for engaged couples. Having not found any mosques providing such a course she attended Marriage Care workshops held in 2018 at St Mary's Church, Harborne, and St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham. (It is mandatory for couples to attend such a course prior to marrying in a Roman Catholic Church.)

Rehana then connected with the Marriage Course builder, Alpha, and attended the course via Zoom with Hope City Church, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from 18 October to 15 November 2020. This provided a good knowledge and preparation for marriage.

A further web search led her to Care for the Family in Newport, Wales. Rehana attended their pre-marriage course via Zoom in March 2021 and at the same time purchasing the 'Marriage By Design' Group leaders' pack.

Rehana commenced offering these courses via Zoom to muslim couples. Post-Covid, Rehana is arranging to offer this course to couples in a mosque venue. Following a proposal and approval process a first event was run in November 2022 at the Al Abbasi Centre, Birmingham, a second pilot planned for September 2023. This pilot scheme is open to engaged couples and those couples within the first year of marriage. The 'Marriage by Design' package from Care for the Family is to be used with some amendments to meet Islamic principles. Each event is anticipated to cater for 10 to 20 couples, and may incur expenses in the future.

Care for the Family have been very supportive of this venture. Below is the link to the



interview with Katharine Hill from Care for the family in February 2022:

Evaluation and Support

Comments received in response to online events have included:

- ‘It gave us ideas how to spend quality time together.’
- ‘Sessions like these are needed in the Muslim community.’

An evaluation survey will be devised for couples to complete after in person sessions in future.

Support will be given by keeping in touch with the couples two years post event for an online session and at this point to access if the tools were used.

Final observations

- The number of divorcees attending the matchmaking events would suggest difficulties in marriages leading to breakdown of their matrimonial relationships. There is some reluctance from some males to consider marrying divorced women.
- Rehana and Mohamed believe that the attitudes of young people are changing, no longer being first generation immigrants but raised and brought up within the British culture.
- While the main focus of their work is with different sections of the muslim community, they prefer not to think in ‘sectarian’ terms but for this work to contribute to bringing together Muslims of all traditions under ‘an Islamic perspective’.