

# 'The Right to Happiness': Re/Marriage after 40 Muslim Women's Views and Experiences

**September 2020**

**Findings Report**

## The Think Tank Programme

The programme is aimed at enabling Muslim women to represent their lived experiences and needs within research policy and practice. MWC endeavours, through this programme, to ensure that Muslim women of all backgrounds can seriously influence policy and decision making at all levels. Muslim women have been used by researchers when it has suited their research projects and government agendas, regurgitating the tired and reductive narratives about 'the Muslim woman'. Women we have worked with over the years have increasingly expressed their frustration with being used as 'subjects' for research agendas framed by others and now want their unmediated voices to be heard.

We aim to enrich and correct the knowledge landscape by ensuring that new relevant research is produced directly by Muslim women on issues that they feel are important to them & their communities, building trust between communities and research institutes. The evidence, recommendations and solutions generated by them will be used to show how the government and both the public and private sectors can help create conditions that allow Muslim women to thrive.

Through creating an army of community researchers who themselves have full awareness of the issues within their communities, women are being empowered to be authors of solutions that bring about societal change. We are creating a legacy of future leaders, community researchers and advocates who will inspire others around them. The findings will be available on our website, through social media outlets, and will also be shared with local authorities and government departments.



## What This Study Covers

The Muslim women of the Think Tank programme identified this topic as an area of great concern to women over the age of 40, who were facing challenges in meeting potential partners for marriage. They wanted this piece of work to highlight the issues faced by Muslim women, identify potential solutions and areas of further research.

50 Muslim women were interviewed for this study. All were aged between 26 and 60 residing/working in the Bradford district. The women were predominantly British Pakistani (90%), and some were Bangladeshi, Arab, and of mixed background.

1 in 3 women (32%) worked in a managerial or professional career, 22% in semi-professional roles, and 11% in administrative roles. The remaining women were home makers. 7 in 10 women were university graduates, and 2 in 5 held post graduate qualifications. The remaining women held lower qualifications.



## Key Findings

3 in 5 women participating in the study knew of or were looking for suitable partners themselves.

### Women's Perceptions of Social Attitudes

- ▶ Most women, a significant 4 in 5, felt that unmarried Muslim women were treated less favourably.
- ▶ And more than half (57%) were wary of how unmarried/divorced women might be viewed negatively in their Muslim Asian community.

### Pathways to Remarriage

- ▶ 2 in 5 women considered interfaith marriage a possible pathway to re/marriage after 40, and almost half of the women (47%) who were either seeking re/marriage or knew of someone who was agreed it could be a solution.
- ▶ 2 in 5 women (40%) who said single Muslim women were treated less favourably also believed interfaith marriage could be a possible solution.
- ▶ Almost all women (98%) agreed that faith leaders had a key role to play in improving communal perceptions and prospects of re/marriage for single Muslim women over the age of 40.

## Key Recommendations

- ▶ Collaborative working with Muslim institutions and mosques a) to develop religious-based campaigns that challenge stereotypes about re/marriage for women over 40; and b) to provide advice and services to support women in meeting/finding suitable partners.
- ▶ Identifying and partnering with Muslim women's networks and organisations, locally and nationally, with experience in providing advice and coaching to single Muslim women over 40 to a) overcome personal and societal barriers to re/marriage; and b) co-create platforms with these networks and organisations specifically designed by Muslim women for Muslim women seeking re/marriage.
- ▶ Collaborating with Islamic professionals and leaders to develop theological discourse on interfaith marriage which takes into consideration changing attitudes and realities.
- ▶ Incorporate services that provide general and religious advice and awareness for single Muslim women seeking re/marriage through supporting the first women-governed mosque initiative of the MWC.



# Findings Expanded

## Seeking a Partner

Most women in the study believed Islam encouraged re/marriage at any age but that many of the barriers were due to cultural or socio-economic factors that affect women over 40.

3 in 5 women participating in the study knew of or were looking for suitable partners themselves, but finding 'suitable men' emerged as a concern; 1 in 3 women identified the lack of potential partners as a key issue. Suitability included religion, background, and caste. Some women additionally explained that 'unsuitability' is engendered by the prevalence of traditional expectations by male partners. Women who feared could curtail their autonomy after years of being financially independent perceived it as a major barrier. Some women were concerned that Muslim dating sites sometimes exposed them to men seeking a second wife or not genuinely looking for a partner.

There was a difference in how women felt depending on whether they had been married previously. 1 in 3 women felt that those not married previously were perceived as 'too old,' whereas divorcees were judged for seeking remarriage. But despite these concerns, many women believed, as one of them put it, that women have "a right to find happiness through companionship".

Some women explained that not having a partner impacted their mental well-being. Concerns about not receiving family support or being rejected by the community were causes for stress. They also mentioned the fear of marriage not working out and that this could bring more humiliation and upset.

More than a quarter of the women (13) mentioned children's well-being as a key consideration. Some women also spoke about children being perceived as 'baggage' by potential partners and their families, and how there is a gender bias toward women with children.



## Women's Perceptions of Social Attitudes

The majority of women (4 in 5) felt that unmarried Muslim women were treated less favourably in the wider community. However, women generally found friends and colleagues to be supportive and non-judgemental of their situation. Many of the women who spoke of negative attitudes mentioned that unmarried women were respected less, divorced women were unfairly deemed responsible for the divorce, and those seeking partners were judged as not being 'marriage material' due to their age. As one woman put it: "They treat you (divorced and single) as someone at fault whether to do with beauty or personality...too old to get married...that you were not marriageable...you need to compromise and are seen as a burden".

More than half of the women were concerned about 'community' and 'family' as putting pressure on women over 40 seeking partners. One woman summed it up as follows: "My family expect me to just look after my kids, that is what my life should be about, and not remarry, but it's not enough". Another woman shared her experience of feeling her company and friendship was often overlooked in favour of married women.

The women described communal attitudes which oscillated between sympathy and exclusion, and many felt that widowed women received more support. They felt that they were not perceived as 'good role models' even though many had raised their children alone and some had successful professional careers.

## Pathways to Re/Marriage: Interfaith Marriage

Polygamy was mentioned in some responses, but no other type of Islamic marriage was mentioned (e.g., pleasure marriage), possibly because the majority are of Sunni background.

Surprisingly, however, 2 in 5 women considered interfaith marriage a possible solution despite it being prohibited for Muslim women according to Islamic Law and 1 in 5 said they would personally consider it. And, almost half of the women who were either seeking re/marriage themselves or knew of someone who was (14 of 30 women) indicated that interfaith marriage is a possibility.

Some women shared their personal experiences. One woman spoke about being approached by non-Muslim men but she had not yet considered that possibility due to her faith. As she understood it, interfaith marriage with 'people of the book' (Ahl al-kitab) i.e. Christian and Jews, was permitted for Muslim men. It was not permitted for Muslim women as the children would then not grow up as Muslims in a Muslim environment. She was, however, struggling to find a suitable Muslim (Pakistani background) partner for a variety of reasons. Samira, aged 49 with 3 grown up children, described an interfaith marriage as 'halal' and acceptable in the eyes of God since she did not wish to have any more children. She wondered if Islamic scholars would be able to provide special dispensation for Muslim women like her.

Three women disclosed they had actually entered into interfaith marriages and were very happy, and another six knew of friends and family members who were in interfaith marriages. The majority, however, emphasised that interfaith marriage was not widely accepted and there is a risk of being ostracised. One Muslim woman who is married to a man of a different faith told us her mother advised her to live in another city to avoid being judged.

## Avenues are available for Muslim women (over 40) to seek partners

Women identified a range of formal and informal networks that could assist in meeting suitable partners. 3 in 4 women were aware of marital websites such as shaadi.com, and Muslim matrimonial sites. Others mentioned marriage events and only a few mentioned friends and family. The lack of platforms addressing their specific needs was considered a major gap in current services.

## Faith Leaders as Change Makers

Almost all women agreed that faith leaders had a role to play in improving the situation for women over the age of 40 either by changing common negative perceptions or developing a more up-to-date theological approach to some of the problems women face. Women participants also wanted to see faith leaders promoting respect for women and challenging the 'beauty contest' mentality which objectifies women.

## Developing The Think Tank Programme

We recruited women from the community through our various networks and partners in the Bradford area, such as the Women's Health Network, voluntary organisations such as Sharing Voices and Womenzone Community Centre, and MWC's social media platforms. The response was overwhelming, reassuring us that there is a dire need for this ground-up approach to research. We selected women between the ages of 18 and 55, who are mostly of Pakistani background. The women have come from different professional fields, including law, community outreach, interfaith work, mental health, activism, civil service, journalism, education and media.

Over a period of 3 months, the women attended a training and development programme with six modules covering a broad range of transferable skills, such as confidence building, communication skills, critical thinking, debating skills, verbal reasoning and basic research skills. In addition, there were two academic modules on developing interview schedules, conducting fieldwork, and applying research ethics, such as obtaining consent and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality.

This training and capacity building was overseen by a Project Coordinator, who designed and delivered the Think Tank programme, facilitated the process and offered a constant point of reference and guidance during fieldwork preparation and implementation. The programme also facilitated the emergence of a personal network of intellectual and emotional support between the women on the Think Tank programme, that would prove crucial during the fieldwork stage.

## Muslim Women's Council

MWC is unique in its local, national, and international reach. We deliver services to the most marginalised members of our communities; the homeless, the excluded and disadvantaged. Our initiatives have addressed community issues ranging from mental health, child sexual exploitation and food poverty.

At the other end of the spectrum, we provide thought leadership and we facilitate and enable change. For example, we have initiated a project to transform and lead discourse on women's access to, presence in, and involvement in Mosques. This initiative has gained national and international support and has been reported globally.

Looking ahead in a context of political turbulence and uncertainty, we have prioritised empowering Muslim women to narrate their lived experiences and make an intervention into policies impacting their lives.

## Conducting The Research

On completion of the training, the second phase of the programme focussed on the research. The women who completed the training programme then carried out the interviews for the four research studies. The group identified a list of key research areas emerging from their lived experiences, some of these areas were difficult and rarely addressed in research. This was then narrowed down to a shortlist of four. The women decided to implement four concurrent studies, organising themselves into smaller community research teams and conducting a minimum of 50 interviews in each of the areas identified. The MWC Think Tank project team provided support with research design and implementation.

The subsequent interview stage lasted for six weeks during which the community researchers were remarkably successful in gaining access and trust within the communities they approached. A wide range of views was captured in all of the studies, as many of the women interviewed shared genuine personal experiences on many sensitive topics.

The process of writing-up reports involved consulting the women researchers and was supported by Dr Shuruq Naguib (Lancaster University) and Dr Ghalia Sarmani (University of Central Lancashire)



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We wish to convey our sincere thanks to our community research teams for their sustained commitment, passionate dedication and insightful input into developing the research themes and questions and implementing four cogent and timely studies.

We would like to express sincerest gratitude to all our interviewees, without whom this would not have been possible.

"The Muslim Women's Council core team provided highly professional support to the Think Tank project, with excellent administrative and research coordination throughout the process. The final reports are the fruits of genuine and outstanding commitment to the vision of community-based research and to the process of co-production with the women researchers." **Dr Shuruq Naguib** (Chair, Muslim



## Quotes from Interviewees

"Well my experience with finding a partner is pretty grim to be honest, hence the single status! Generally ranging from frustration, disappointment, disgust, shock, horror, sadness, anger and then just being mostly p\*\*\*\*d off with the men and the women, including the aunties. So, yeah, I pretty much gave up on finding a partner a few years ago."

"Most of these guys think they know religion but all they know is control. They have no humility, they meet you and start talking inappropriately and I'm like what on earth! I feel that aunties somehow allow these men to be propelled to some weird godlike status and there is no respect or morals. Men think they can buy you, and if they can't, you're an uptight so and so. I find it difficult. I really don't know what the answer is, I'm not sure I have the energy. I literally have had men say such stupid s\*\*t to me, and I think, let me go on one more date. Maybe he was being nervous or something, always excuses for men".

"I have vague thoughts of 'I'll try again' (searching for a partner) then I get panicked and think I literally don't know if I can bear to find out if this guy is a creep or not."

## Case Study



Sughra\*, one of 3 siblings, met Dominic at university. They married a few years after leaving university. Sughra's older sister had already run away, so her family were very upset and cautious as a result of the whole episode. Sughra never planned to run away and abandon her family, nor did she want her decision to bring shame upon her already torn family. She decided not to tell them. Instead she carried on with her married life away from her family and community, in a big city large enough for her to be concealed within the crowd.

Only one of Sughra's sisters was at her wedding. On the very sad day that Sughra's father passed away, Dominic was there under the pretext of being a cousin's friend...despite her intense sadness, Sughra was unable to gain comfort from her husband's presence, nor reveal their relationship. She vowed to tell her mother about her situation, but sadly her mother passed away within a few months of her father. To this day, Sughra regrets them not meeting and having the opportunity to get to know Dominic and her daughters, now aged 8 and 12.

Sughra has since then introduced Dominic and the girls to immediate family. They now have a relationship with her family, and her daughters have met wider family too.

Sughra says the community's response has been as she expected; judgemental and disapproving, but the people this would have hurt the most are no longer there. As far as she is concerned, 'the community can stick their views - it does not matter.'

Sughra was lucky, Dominic was very understanding. They both live a happy, supportive life with each other and their daughters. But Sughra was never able to bring her husband home. Her parents never got to meet their granddaughters. Despite the hefty price, Sughra even today feels it was the decision of least pain.

*\*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.*