

MUSLIM
WOMEN'S
COUNCIL

Infidelity in Marriage

Think + Do Tank Report

Background

The way we do research to inform policy isn't working. Today, most community based/'led' research is done through collaborations between large science or specialist research institutes partnering with local organisations. Whilst this is an attempt to enrich the quality of research and to bring wider social benefits, it still lacks a deeper

representation of the communities they are trying to help. Where such partnerships are formed the experiences are not always productive or conducive to drawing on the knowledge and expertise of all participants, as they remain the subject, not the co-authors and co-creators of the research.

There is a need for a process to place individuals and communities as drivers of research that considers the issues they face; and lead to practical responses and recommendations from the ground up.

There is a need for a radical shift and movement in how authentic data and insights are collected from women of Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. In response MWC have developed an approach

that focuses on the design and delivery of collaborative research to create better policy and practice, driving practical solutions that address women's health and wellbeing.

Think + Do Tank

With the support of Wellcome Trust, Smallwood Trust and Friends Provident Foundation, we hope to reverse the current trend of Muslim males and non-Muslims researching and advocating on behalf of Muslim women, especially regarding issues of health, wellbeing and bioscience.

Our approach will straddle the 'Think+Do Tank' between both policy and beneficiaries (Muslim women) and will offer authentic insight and appropriate solutions, as it will be led by the beneficiaries. We focus on the relevance, credibility, legitimacy and utility of the research we do, ensuring that we position our research for use.

MWC focuses on Muslim women from Bradford and surrounding areas. Our work aims to eradicate a climate of misogyny and patriarchy fueled by public stereotyping and male-dominated interpretations of women's roles and positions. In short, society is denying these women their ability to think and act independently or contribute to the creation of health, wellbeing and bio-science policies and practices that affect them and their community.

For example, Muslim women have not been engaged as contributors to research and policy reflective of them. It seems that most research is a male bastion, which undermines their effectiveness and puts them at a disadvantage and impacts on how they research and present the needs of women. This project will be women led and women governed, therefore putting these women at the heart of the research.



What This Study Covers

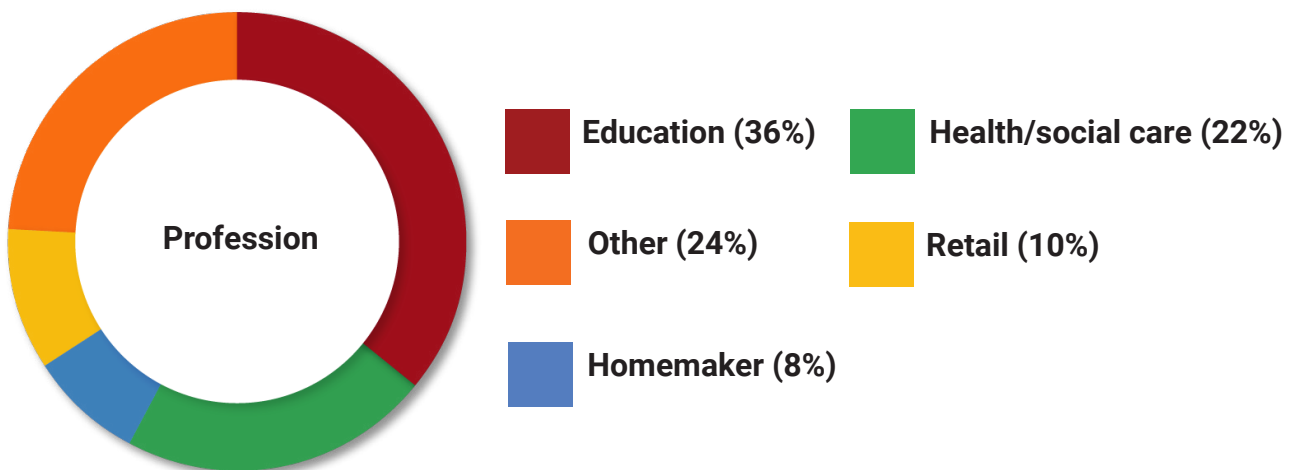
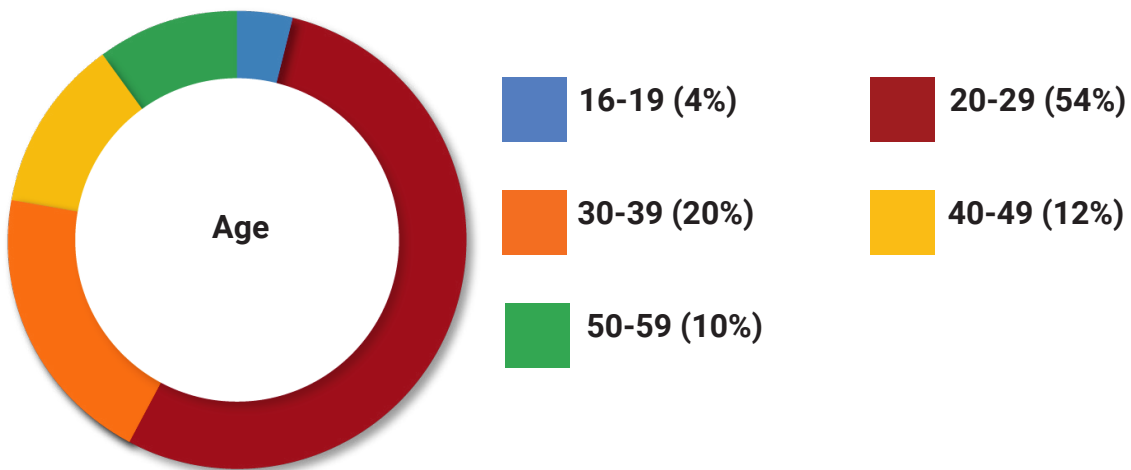
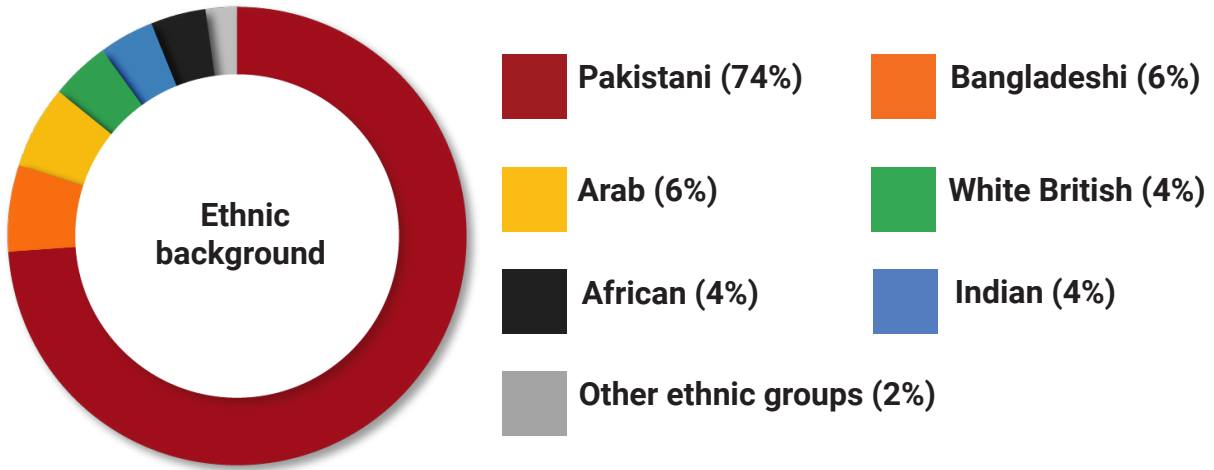
A YouGov study completed in 2015 found that 1 in 5 British adults have had an affair. These figures had not been broken down to identify whether these individuals were married or in long-term relationships, or their religion and ethnic background. However, it is clear that cheating is prevalent within relationships across all communities.

The institution of marriage is an institution that has withstood the test of time. Islam calls upon the Muslim community to preserve this sacred and beautiful tradition and to make it a conduit for coming closer to God. However, over time there has been an increase in infidelity in marriage amongst Muslim couples. This study sets out to explore the concept of physical and non-sexual 'cheating' in Muslim marriages and examines its effects on Muslim women and their mental health, who they go to for

support and intergenerational differences on how our women deal with the issue. Are Muslim women staying in unfaithful, adulterous relationships longer than they should? What resources and support do they have access to when they are faced with an unfaithful relationship? Furthermore, the increased prevalence of social media has allowed us to contact people with the touch of a button- we take a look at whether social media has made it easier to cheat on your partner.

Our community researchers asked Muslim women to share either their own experience or that of a female family member or friend, on their experience of infidelity in marriage.

50 Muslim women undertook the survey from across the UK. The participants were aged between 16 and 59, with the three most common ethnic backgrounds being Pakistani (74%), Arab (6%) and Bangladeshi (6%).



Key Findings

- An overwhelming 94% of women felt infidelity is not just limited to physical intimacy; they specified emotional connections, lying, flirting and general lack of morals & boundaries with another person as examples.
- 5 out of the 50 women (10%) shared experiences of women being unfaithful in their marriages, the other 90% shared about men's infidelity.

Breaking Stereotypes – 'Muslim men always have more than one wife'

- Data from the survey shows 84% of women were the only wife in their marriage.
- 4 women shared that their husband had other wives.

Discovering The Infidelity



- Text messages
- Deleted emails
- Intuition
- Through friends
- Spouse confessing the truth
- Witnessing it in person
- Mysterious anonymous calls
- Social media messages
- Unusual behaviour

Motivations For Infidelity

- Spouse had mental health issues
- History of visiting escorts
- No boundaries
- Boredom in marital relationship
- Lack of integrity
- Lack of satisfaction in the marriage
- Something to do, no actual reason
- Dishonesty
- Forced marriage
- Habit
- Pre-marital relationship with another person that continued during marriage
- Incompatibility in marriage
- Flirtatious personality
- Family interference and miscommunication in the marriage

Impact on Mental Health and Self-Esteem



86% of respondents said their mental health was negatively impacted by their partner being unfaithful, in the following ways:

- Trust issues
- Self-consciousness
- Severe depression
- Anxiety
- Feeling inadequate as a woman
- Lost job due to having a stroke
- Drug abuse
- Felt belittled
- Heartbroken, shocked
- Embarrassed, guilty and ashamed
- Hurt & confused
- Betrayed, enraged & disgusted
- In denial
- Trapped with nowhere to go
- Completely distraught
- Felt like less of a man

Seeking Support



Muslim women have the option to seek support from friends, family and community/faith leaders – but do they take this and option, and why?

- 56% of responses stated that they did not seek support from anyone.
- Of the 44% that did, they were supported by family, friends, mental health/marriage counsellors and therapy.

84% of respondents said they did not seek support from community/faith leaders:

- “There’s a level of judgment that comes with those of a higher religious ‘status”
- “We were lucky he understood; I would not have approached another faith-leader”
- “From the community there was no support whatsoever”
- “The Pakistani community is very sexist. It’s always the woman’s fault according to the community”
- “Betrayal like this is accepted in Islam. A man does not need to tell”
- “The Muslim community is not very understanding, infidelity is shamed upon”
- “I feel like they are one sided and it’s a man’s world so most imams and people like that are men so they back the men to an extent”
- “I feel the religious leaders particularly in Bradford are quite open to offer advice in hard circumstances. Whether you want a male or female to talk to is up to you”
- “People have misinterpreted the guidelines around marriage which religious leaders can confirm”
- “I like to keep my personal things to myself”
- “Local religious leaders are not forthcoming”

- “Getting cheated on alone is not something that cultures can cope with, They see it as taboo and a woman should just deal with it, and the same goes for divorce and separation”

Breaking Stereotypes - ‘Muslim women are oppressed, scared of their husband, voiceless, stuck in marriages’

- Often Muslim women are perceived to be less ambitious, fearless and confrontational than women of a White Western background.
- However, statistics from the survey show that the majority of the Muslim women have no qualms confronting an issue, protecting their rights and womanhood as 76% of women openly spoke to their partner about their suspected infidelity.

Confronting The Cheating Partner

- 76% of those surveyed did confront their partner after discovering their infidelity.
- Of the people who confronted, 55% of the partners either denied their actions, were unrepentant or blamed their partner for causing them to be unfaithful.
- 76% of those surveyed considered divorce/separation, with 42% going ahead with that decision.

Reasons For Staying In The Marriage

- “The have a daughter together so the wife concentrated on her”
- “We worked at what goodness we have”
- “They are both trying again”
- “They spoke about it and moved on for the sake of their children”
- “They stayed together, I think she realised her options were limited financially”
- “You have to persevere”
- “It helped identify triggers and actually our relationship is a lot stronger now”
- “After separating for a while, we talked and came to an agreement, to leave the past and start afresh”
- “They both apologised and said they would try again for the sake of the child”
- “She felt her cultural and religious obligation was to stay with him”
- “She chose to believe him and let go of her doubts about him”
- “We stayed together and promised to stay honest with each other”
- “We just carried on together for the kids”



40% of those surveyed said their children did influence their actions upon finding out about the infidelity:

- “If we weren’t expecting, I would have probably left”
- “I could not support myself and children financially”
- “Safety of child and not having child being with a step mum”
- “The need to lead and live by example hence the best decision was to walk away from the marriage to exemplify appropriate behaviour and show that abuse and infidelity was totally unacceptable”
- “At first it didn’t but when we were separated it did, because we felt like we were being selfish towards our child”
- “They stayed together because of the kids”
- “We don’t want to ruin our child’s life”
- “They deserve 2 parents who are able to speak in a civil manner”
- “I knew my child didn’t deserve to be raised in that toxic environment”
- “It was the main reason we stayed together we didn’t want to hurt or damage them”

Only 22% of those surveyed felt that over time, the view towards infidelity might change in the Muslim community:

- “Often religion and culture is mixed. Religion is not against divorce or taking action (to an extent) after infidelity and Islam allows for people to divorce in such circumstances however culture is often misconstrued with religion. And

this caused communities to not allow or objectify the women to leave or separate from the man regardless of the actions beforehand”

- “I think the community might realise it is not the woman’s fault if her husband cheats”
- “Hypocrisy- especially where I moved to (Bradford- Asian community, sorry mums- you need to teach your sons better and stop mollycoddling them!)”
- “I think it’s very frequent now and Muslim girls need support and to know that is life after divorce”
- “I feel it is becoming so normalised with so much just being allowed and individuals don’t realise how bad and wrong it is”
- “It doesn’t need to change as Islamically it is anyone’s right to leave, however cultural reason make it difficult- DONT CONFUSE THE TWO”
- “Yes I hope that the culture will change as people deserve to be happy out of a marriage if it does make them unhappy”
- “We hope it will - the idea of taboo topics has been broken down and people are more open”
- “I would hope so, so people can go to their religious leaders regardless of gender and it is a duty on those leaders”
- “Things change such as having children, marrying outside of your culture, child rearing etc have changed - people become more open minded, and we have come a long way but we still have a long way to go but until we eliminate the culture that those stigmatised views come from nothing will change”
- “Mindsets do need to change like people let the women get blamed all the time so it needs to change but I don’t know if it will”
- “The view that women have to stay and be hurt I don’t see changing, although it isn’t Islamic people like to think it is and it’s been like that for many years”

The Role of Social Media

- 64% of those surveyed felt social media was or may have been an influencing factor in their partner being unfaithful, citing the open opportunity it provides to contact others, acting on curiosity, receiving attention and the easy access.
- An overwhelming 98% of those surveyed felt social media causes more people

to be unfaithful, as it provides easy access to people, more temptation, makes it easier to live a secret life, attracting people towards 'perfect'/fake images/lives.

Key Recommendations

- Faith leaders to provide Islamic guidance, in the form of pre-marital courses/counselling, so that prospective couples understand how to conduct a mutually respectful marital relationship. It is also important to discuss the role of social media in relationships.
- Educate the Muslim community on the rights of marriage, especially for a woman if her husband is unfaithful. Rather than being stigmatised culturally, what actions does Islam advise?
- Educate women on becoming financially independent, so they do not need to rely on others regardless of their marital status.

The Muslim Women's Council Response

As a Muslim led organisation providing services specifically for Muslim women, we have developed the following services to help local Muslim women address the impact of infidelity on their relationships:

- Free legal advice clinic on family law.
- Access to women led Sharia council to address the lack of support, religious misinformation and/or discriminatory advice that Muslim women receive from men-led councils.
- Local campaign and information encouraging women to register their marriages to ensure their rights within marriage.
- FRAGILE project to create awareness of child sexual exploitation.
- Aunties Network to offer pastoral support to women suffering from sexual and domestic abuse.

Case Study 1



"I am 29 years old with one child. I found out my husband was sleeping around, as I discovered some text messages. When I confronted him, he didn't believe he had done anything wrong because he's 'allowed four wives'. I felt extremely belittled and resentful towards him. I didn't seek any support from anyone, and we haven't really dealt with the situation. At the time we argued and now I have given up trying, although we are still married.

I didn't consider divorce or separation, due to cultural reasons and the fact that I have

a child. I don't want to put my child's life at risk or ruin their life. People in the Muslim community are very ignorant about things like infidelity. I did not consider being unfaithful myself, as two wrongs don't make a right.

I don't think social media was an influence in my husband being unfaithful, but I do think it causes more infidelity. This is because it has become a norm and social media is somewhat supportive. There is more access and opportunities for infidelity from social media".

Case Study 2



“I am a 41-year-old beauty therapist with one child. I got married at the age of 21, and the marriage lasted around five years. My ex-husband cheated on me for years and I guess I always had a feeling... but was too comfortable in my life to say anything. I was always okay on my own and never feared a man leaving me, I had a lot of pride so I didn't care.

I found out in person about his cheating, as I actually saw him with a woman at a restaurant. It wasn't this that bothered me, it was the fact that he lied and said he would be playing football. I was confused and I guess I just saw it coming. I didn't realise how badly I was hurt. My mental health was horrid, but I masked it with saying I didn't care.

Our relationship was dead straight away, everything we had was gone. I already made my decision to leave him and take my

child, so I didn't need advice from anyone, nor did I approach anywhere. There was no way I was staying in that relationship. When I confronted my ex-husband, he was shocked and he couldn't believe that his lie was actually out in the open. I told him it was done, and we divorced. You shouldn't have to stay in a marriage if you are being hurt by cheating.

The fact we had a child made it harder for him, but I knew my child didn't deserve to be raised in that toxic environment, because I know I would have started to show my anger towards my ex-husband in front of our child and it wouldn't have been right. Social media was definitely a factor in the cheating, as he had been talking to the girl over Instagram DMs. Social media is the easiest way for someone to cheat, if you ask me”.

**Report created by the Think + Do Tank
participants supported by the MWC team.**

