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BRITISH MUSLIMS: FAMILIES AND FAMILY LIFE

This guide provides basic information on kinship structure and relationships, marriage and related issues, everyday family life, and children's religious socialisation.

> **The family is the most important unit within British Muslim communities. It is the place where religious and social norms and values are shared and practised.**

KEY POINTS

- The family is important for religious and cultural socialisation. The home is an environment where norms and values are shared and reinforced, including those relating to gender.
- Kinship structures and traditions vary according to country of origin and exposure to western society and culture, but tribe and clan arrangements and transnational ties remain important, especially for the first generation of migrants.
- Kinship relationships had a role to play in the migration process, affecting where families chose to settle, where men worked and with whom they socialised. Extended families exchanged marriage partners as well as material goods and favours in the UK and back home.
- Marriage in Islam is a civil contract between a man and a woman. Most couples in the UK have both a civil and an Islamic marriage, the former being a state requirement and the latter an important religious and social custom.
- Most British Muslims marry within their own ethnic group, and many from South Asian families still marry a blood relative.
- An increasing number of young Muslim women prefer to marry a Muslim from the UK on the grounds that they will be more compatible. Fewer marriages are arranged

solely by parents, though parental approval is generally sought.

- British Muslims are getting married older than previously, often after graduating and moving into work. Some are choosing ‘Islamic marriages’ rather than arranged ones.
- Muslim marriage and divorce in the UK have come under increasing public scrutiny, with forced marriage and sham marriage criminalised, and underage marriage, polygamy and the role of *Shari‘ah* councils receiving media attention.
- A minority of Muslim homes have separate spaces for men and women. In general, self-segregation is only practised when visitors who are not close family relatives are present. The home is often considered the domain of women and children, as opposed to public space which is seen as male. However, women increasingly participate in public life.
- Family and home are where children learn to be Muslims, and where they internalise cognitive and embodied knowledge, practices, skills and traditions. Early learning may also be influenced by religious organisations and by minority-consciousness.
- Muslims have been more successful than other religious groups in the UK at passing on their religious beliefs and practices from one generation to the next.
- Most Muslim children in the UK learn to read the Qur’an in Arabic, at mosque school (*madrasah*), at the home of an independent teacher, in their own homes or on Skype.
- Most Muslim supplementary schools also offer other aspects of Islamic Studies, as well as formal instruction in an ethnic language and culture.

FAMILY

The family is the most important unit within British Muslim communities. Whether extended or nuclear in type, it is the primary location for children’s socialisation both as Muslims and as second or third generation members of heritage communities. It is the place where religious and social norms and values are shared and practised, but also where they are adapted and challenged, including by wider society. Most ethnic communities among the British Muslim population have very close family arrangements, but migration and the minority context have added new pressures.

This guide provides basic information on kinship structure and relationships, marriage and related issues, everyday family life, and children’s religious socialisation.

KINSHIP LOYALTIES

In the UK, kinship structures and relationships, and the terminology used to describe them, differ from one Muslim community to another, and on them rest the traditional affiliations and factions that lead both to family practices and to internal community hierarchies, differences and rifts. After religious and national markers, ethnic and tribal divisions are the key levels of differentiation. Among Afghan migrants, for example, this might include Pashtuns, Baluchis and Turkmen; among Nigerians, Yoruba and Hausa; among Somalis, Darod, Isaq and Hawiye among others. For Muslims with South Asian heritage (Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian), the general term used for the extended kinship group is *biraderi* (literally ‘brotherhood’). Other terms apply for the extended family in Muslim communities originating elsewhere.

In many British Muslim communities, kinship relationships affected the migration process (e.g. providing financial support and enabling chain migration). It had an impact on where families

Members of the younger generation often criticised their elders for focusing on ethnic culture and affairs back home at the expense of their Islamic identity and practice.

settled, and often where men worked, as well as with whom they socialised. Extended families were bound together by a 'gift economy', through the exchange of marriage partners as well as material goods and favours in the UK and back home. In addition to supporting the migration process, kinship networks also had an impact on political and religious organisation within communities, especially among the first generation of migrants. In Bradford, for example, these networks caught the eye of mainstream political parties eager to capitalise on the potential for a bloc vote.

> *Here, the kinship network was a mobilising resource: if kinship or **biraderi** elders could be brought 'on side', they would be helpful in ensuring that, not only their vote, but also the votes of their wives and voting-age children could be secured. There developed a system of patronage, whereby local leaders of all political parties, but especially the Labour party, developed links with Pakistani community leaders – often **biraderi** elders – and forged a gateway to the Pakistani vote.*
>
> (Parveen Akhtar, *British Muslim Political Participation: After Bradford*, 2012)

These arrangements have since been disrupted, however, as the next generation of local Muslims has made its own claims about the things that matter to younger people, and as affiliations and friendships have become less kin-based and more reliant on work or university relationships and those forged through Islamic organisations.

Although some adults participate in groups or go to mosques which serve all Muslims irrespective of their ethnic background, many have continued to frequent organisations in which their heritage language and traditions are maintained. This was particularly the case for first generation male Muslims. Members of the younger generation often criticised their elders for focusing on ethnic culture and affairs back home at the expense of their Islamic identity and practice. This change of orientation contributed to the formation from the 1990s of a number of new Islamic groups and media channels.

MARRIAGE ISSUES

The roles, conduct and responsibilities pertaining to marriage and family life are discussed extensively in the Qur'an and Hadith, often with reference to the household of the Prophet Muhammad. Although marriage in Islam is a primarily a civil contract between a man and a woman, for most couples marrying in the UK, both a civil and an Islamic marriage are undertaken. The former is a state requirement and the latter an important religious and social custom.

The manner in which marriages are carried out depends on the cultural traditions of the family as well as the legal process, but the majority of British Muslims marry within their own ethnic group, and many of those of South Asian heritage marry a blood relative. Tradition, security and property issues explain the persistence of this arrangement. An increasing number of young Muslim women, however, prefer to marry a Muslim from the UK, on the grounds that the partners are more likely to be compatible and to understand one another's needs and attitudes. Fewer marriages are arranged solely by the parents than was once the case, though parental approval is generally sought. Furthermore, British Muslims are getting married older than previously, often after graduating and moving into work. Some are choosing 'Islamic marriages' rather than arranged

ones, with the focus being on the couple's shared religious values and identity, and a pre-nuptial process that is chaperoned and *halal* (religiously sanctioned).

There are some common assumptions made about Muslim marriages by outsiders (for example, that all marriages are arranged and/or forced; that it is easy for a Muslim man to divorce his wife; and that polygamy is widely approved of). Equally, there are many cases where the Islamic teachings about marriage and family life are presented as if they were common practice rather than ideals. Neither of these actually matches the diverse practices and attitudes of British Muslims. Furthermore, these are changing. There is now more evidence of marital instability and single-parenthood. Muslims families display a range of attitudes towards marriage, living together, gender, domestic responsibilities and parenting.

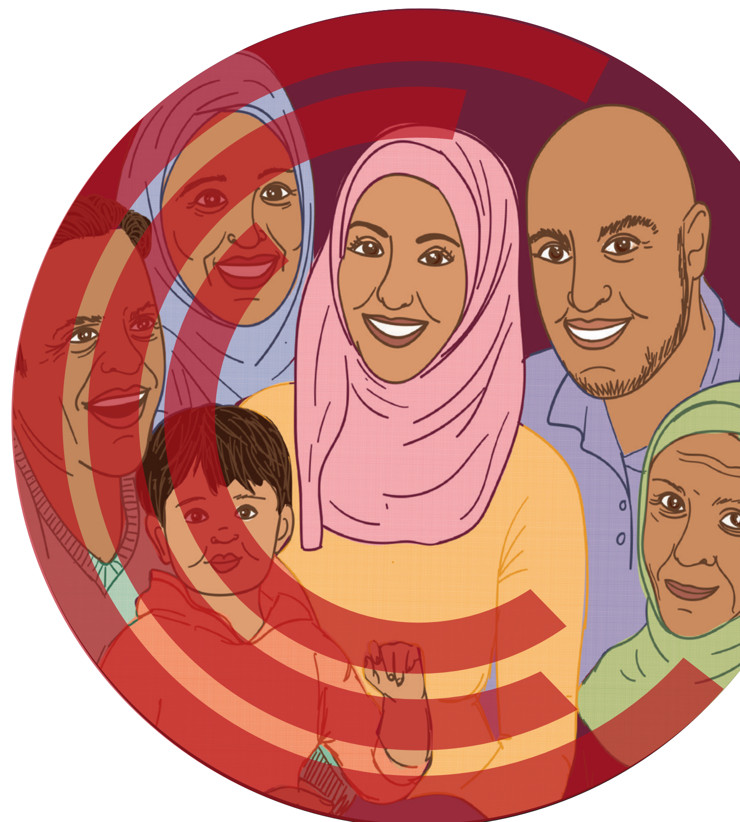
Many aspects of Muslim marriage in the UK have come under increased public scrutiny, including forced marriage and sham marriage, both now criminalised. Underage marriage and polygamy have received media attention, as has the role of *Shari'ah* councils in divorce proceedings.

EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE

The Islamic and often ethnic character of the home is expressed in its material and sensory culture. Internal decoration often contains the calligraphy and geometric patterns of Islamic art, and images of iconic mosques and shrines, all of which help to reinforce Muslim identity and piety. Similarly, the sounds of Islam may be replicated, as recordings are played of devotional songs, and Qur'anic recitation.

Some Muslim homes have separate spaces for men and women. In general, self-segregation is only practised when visitors who are not close family relatives are present. The home is often considered to be the domain of women and children, as opposed to public space which is male territory. However, this general rule is repeatedly transgressed, with women of all ages out and about in universities and colleges, work places, shopping malls, on public transport and, increasingly, in mosques. Some women cover all or parts of the body (with a *hijab*, *niqab* or *burqa*) in public; others do not. It remains the case, though, that, with fewer Muslim women in the work force than men, the home is the place where they spend most of their time, with children, and often with relatives and female friends.

Homes are also prayer spaces, with families laying down mats and performing the prayer (*salah*) together. Home may also be the place where children learn to recite the Qur'an. During Ramadan, it is where family members desist from food and drink; it is where they break the fast at sundown. During festivals, it becomes a place of celebration, where gifts are exchanged and food shared. British Muslims relax at home. They cook and eat, do chores, play video games, do their homework, watch TV, contact family and friends elsewhere, gossip and joke together.



LEARNING TO BE A MUSLIM

It has been said that, 'no aspect of a Muslim's life can remain untouched by religion' (Halstead, *An Islamic Concept of Education*, 2004). But how do Muslims view the primary stage of socialisation, in which the young acquire and internalise cognitive and embodied knowledge, practices, skills and traditions, especially in the family and at home? How do children learn to be Muslims?

> *A child will usually be marked as a Muslim from the first moments of life, by having the adhan (call to prayer) spoken into her ear. She will also be given a name which marks her as Muslim. When she is growing up, the faith will very likely be made material in the fabric of the home. This often starts at the front door with Arabic text on the lintel. Inside, framed verses from the Qur'an may be displayed, as well as pictures of famous mosques, usually in preference to family photographs.*
>
> (Jonathan Scourfield, *Learning to be a Muslim*, 2017)

Whilst recognising that there were multiple ways to be Muslim and many different family arrangements and contexts, Jonathan Scourfield and his colleagues, in their research on British Muslim childhood in Cardiff, identified the key factors in this learning process. In addition to doctrinal learning, through vocal and practical repetition, they noted the way in which children unconsciously acquired the dispositions, habits and moral behaviours associated with being a Muslim, through observation, participation and imitation. This practical and moral learning included, among other things, how to pray, how and when to serve food and eat, how to recite the Qur'an, how to show respect to elders, and how to behave according to gender norms and expectations.

But being part of a visible minority in the UK, especially one that is socially and economically disadvantaged, and subject to discrimination and stigmatisation, is also important in the process of children's identity formation and their sense of community and belonging. Religion may play a more significant role in such a learning context than it might for children being brought up in a cultural majority, or in a minority that is not visibly different or the subject of discrimination. Further, being socialised as part of a minority will involve mixing with others from a similar background and with shared characteristics.

> **Mosque schools focus chiefly on Arabic recitation of the Qur'an. Schools of this kind have existed since the 7th century in the Middle East and Africa.**

Turning from informal to formal religious nurture, the final factor identified by Scourfield and his colleagues was the role of religious organisations in learning. Most Muslim children in the UK learn to read and recite the Qur'an in Arabic, whether they do this is a daily mosque school, at the home of an independent teacher, in their own homes or even on Skype. Often termed 'supplementary schools' in the educational literature (in so far as they supplement the learning that children receive at primary and then secondary schools), mosque schools focus chiefly on Arabic recitation of the Qur'an. Schools of this kind have existed since the 7th century in the Middle East and Africa. In the UK, they have played an important part in Muslim children's Islamic education and the development of their identity as Muslims. Most Muslim supplementary schools also offer other aspects of Islamic Studies, as well as formal instruction in an ethnic language and culture.

CASE STUDY

INSIDE MOSQUE SCHOOLS

In their survey of 179 mosque schools (*madrassa*), Myriam Cherti & Laura Bradley found that public knowledge about such schools was largely based on negative media representations made without recourse to research or evidence. This included assumptions about poor teaching, heavy-handed punishment, child abuse, rote learning, anti-western and inflammatory rhetoric, and the potential for radicalisation.

Their research showed that, in 2009, there were some 2,000 mosque schools operating in the UK known to local authorities, serving some 250,000 British Muslim children. Their survey of schools revealed that nearly half had been in operation for more than 10 years. Half had their own premises, with 53 per cent of all *madrassas* located in mosques, and the remainder in local mainstream schools (8 per cent), community centres (11 per cent), private homes or residences (3 per cent), or somewhere else (2 per cent). Most schools operated with class sizes of between 10 and 20 students. Nearly all students attended for two years or more, with about half attending for at least five years.

Although the principal purpose of such schools was learning the Qur'an, 70 per cent of schools said they also taught about culture and heritage. Some schools also gave additional support to students in national curriculum subjects, particularly Maths, English and Science. Most teachers (75 per cent) were imams, with the remainder being teachers trained in the UK or abroad (almost all of them volunteers).

Parents, students and other stakeholders stated that attendance at mosque school helped build children's confidence in their Muslim identity and their general social skills, as well as their sense of being part of a community. It supplemented their mainstream education by adding to children's knowledge of Arabic and their mother tongue as well as English, and to their understanding of Islamic practices and values. Some said that the schools helped make links to other local communities, through visits, joint events, open days, and fairs. The authors stated that a key finding of their research was that 'madrassas are changing as new practices and a new generation of teachers is entering the sector'.

Myriam Cherti & Laura Bradley, *Inside Madrassas*, 2011

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