

‘The Truth About Muslim Marriages’
60% of Muslim women surveyed are in Marriages not Recognised by Law
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In the largest survey of its kind, commissioned by Channel 4 and True Vision Aire Production Company, 903 Muslim women in the UK were surveyed to ascertain the extent of non-registered religious only marriages within Muslim communities. The findings provide ground-breaking information about the marriage practices of an extremely difficult to reach part of the population.

The key finding is that 60% of the women surveyed were in religious only marriages, which were not preceded nor followed by a civil registration resulting in the marriages being unrecognised by the law in England and Wales. Consequently, these women do not benefit from family law protections, and this means that upon breakdown of the relationship, they cannot expect to benefit from any financial remedies available within family law.

Of the 60%, 28% were not aware that a *nikkah* (religious marriage) is not something recognised by law. These women laboured under the misconception that their religious ceremonies were in fact legal, and these religious marriages are often celebrated at considerable financial cost to the couple and their families; and with all the pomp, grandeur and ceremony we have come to expect of most wedding celebrations. As a result, the line between legal and non-recognised becomes increasingly blurred. Conversely, a majority of 66% of those in religious only marriages knew their marriage had no legal standing and about half said they didn't plan to follow the religious marriages with a civil ceremony in future. This signifies that for half of those within religious only marriages, they have entered into their relationships on these terms fully cognisant that they will be disadvantaged as compared with legally married couples if things should go wrong. Of these, the majority felt the religious ceremony was the most important, or said they were happy the way they were.

31% of those surveyed had married within a mosque, and of these, only 3.6% had a dual civil ceremony at the same time. This is an extremely low incidence of registration, reflective of the fact that only 1 in 10 mosques in England and Wales are registered to conduct marriages. It is entirely plausible that the rate of registration of marriages will increase if the number of mosques registered to perform marriages rises.

The common denominator between registered and religious only marriages is the imam who conducts the ceremony. Thus, this is a key individual within the process, and yet only 12% of those surveyed reported that the imam advised them on the procedure they must follow in order to be married in the eyes of the law. This is perhaps reflective of a general lack of knowledge or apathy amongst mosques and imams on their key role in bridging the gap between a religious only marriage and one with the full protections of that state's family laws.

Moving on, a key issue which seems to crop up where *nikkah* only marriages are concerned is polygamy. Of the 903 women surveyed, approximately 11% or just over 1 in 10 were involved in polygamous marriages. Of these, 37% had not agreed to the polygamy, while the remaining 63% did agree. These women were concerned about the impact that recognition of the *nikkah* would potentially have on their marriages.

Continuing on the issue of polygamy, 89% of the women surveyed stated that they did not want a polygamous relationship. This is a very interesting statistic, revealing a new cultural norm of monogamous marriages within British Muslim communities, no doubt reflective of wider societies' marriage norms.

The survey results for under 25s also present some complex issues. Within this age group, the number of religious only marriages is much higher and only 20% were in legally recognised marriages as compared with 40% overall. The causes for this are numerous, but the prevailing reason seems to be that a religious only marriage ceremony allows these young couples to effectively date and get to know each other while staying within the boundaries of religious norms. These young couples will not want their marriages to be recognised as this means they lose the flexibility in which they can explore their relationships. These couples will often go on to marry formally later in their relationships, often prompted by one of two major life events – buying a house and/or having children.

Background to the Survey

20 Muslim female researchers with access to Muslim communities were recruited and trained to undertake the survey. This would enable them to reach Muslim women who are widely recognised as hard to reach for research purposes. The Respondents to the survey were solicited at events and venues across UK cities where the Muslims population is above 20%. The survey was developed by academics, lawyers and statisticians, and responses were anonymous. Muslim women were surveyed in the following cities: Glasgow, Newcastle, Preston, Bradford, Stockport, Manchester, Stoke on Trent, Leicester, Birmingham, Oxford, Cardiff, London, Bristol, Gloucester, Cambridge. Participants were identified using existing networks, followed by the snowballing technique.

These survey findings provide invaluable data to the study of Muslim religious only marriages and is the largest survey of its kind conducted to date.

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