



# It's Muslim Boy Meets Girl, but Don't Call It Dating

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James Estrin/The New York Times

Fatima Alim has strong views about the kind of woman her son Suehaib, 26, should marry.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR  
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CHICAGO — So here's the thing about speed dating for Muslims.

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James Estrin/The New York Times

Once the banquet got under way, the mothers were plenty busy themselves.

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James Estrin/The New York Times

Men and women lined up to register.

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Many American Muslims — or at least those bent on maintaining certain conservative traditions — equate anything labeled “dating” with hellfire, no matter how short a time is involved. Hence the wildly popular speed dating sessions at the largest annual Muslim conference in North America were given an entirely more respectable label. They were called the “matrimonial banquet.”

“If we called it speed dating, it will end up with real dating,” said Shamshad Hussain, one of the organizers, grimacing.

Both the banquet earlier this month and various related seminars underscored the difficulty that some American Muslim families face in grappling with an issue on which many prefer not to assimilate. One seminar, called “Dating,” promised attendees helpful hints for “Muslim families struggling to save their children from it.”

The couple of hundred people attending the dating seminar burst out laughing when Imam Muhamed Magid of the Adams Center, a collective of seven mosques in Virginia, summed up the basic instructions that Muslim American parents give their adolescent children, particularly males: “Don't talk to the Muslim girls, ever, but you are going to marry them. As for the non-Muslim girls, talk to them, but don't ever bring one home.”

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James Estrin/The New York Times

At a "matrimonial banquet," single Muslim American men spent seven minutes at each table, including the one at which Alia Abbas sat before moving on.

"These kids grew up in America, where the social norm is that it is O.K. to date, that it is O.K. to have sex before marriage," Imam Magid said in an interview. "So the kids are caught between the ideal of their parents and the openness of the culture on this issue."

The questions raised at the seminar reflected just how pained many American Muslims are by the subject. One middle-aged man wondered if there was anything he could do now that his 32-year-old son had declared his intention of marrying a (shudder) Roman Catholic. A young man asked what might be considered going too far when courting a Muslim woman.

Panelists warned that even seemingly innocuous e-mail exchanges or online dating could topple one off the Islamic path if one lacked vigilance. "All of these are traps of the Devil to pull us in and we have no idea we are even going that way," said Ameena Jandali, the moderator of the dating seminar.

Hence the need to come up with acceptable alternatives in North America, particularly for families from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, where there is a long tradition of arranged marriages.

One panelist, Yasmeen Qadri, suggested that Muslim mothers across the continent band together in an organization called "Mothers Against Dating," modeled on Mothers Against Drunk Driving. If the term "arranged marriage" is too distasteful to the next generation, she said, then perhaps the practice could be Americanized simply by renaming it "assisted marriage," just like assisted living for the elderly.

"In the United States we can play with words however we want, but we are not trying to set aside our cultural values," said Mrs. Qadri, a professor of education.

Basically, for conservative Muslims, dating is a euphemism for premarital sex. Anyone who partakes risks being considered morally louche, with their marriage prospects dimming accordingly, particularly young women.

Mrs. Qadri and other panelists see a kind of hybrid version emerging in the United States, where the young do choose their own mates, but the parents are at least partly involved in the process in something like half the cases.

Having the families involved can help reduce the divorce rate, Imam Majid said, citing a recent informal study that indicated that one third of Muslim marriages in the United States end in divorce. It was still far too high, he noted, but lower than the overall American average. Intermarriages outside Islam occur, but remain relatively rare, he said.

Scores of parents showed up at the marriage banquet to chaperone their children. Many had gone through arranged marriages — meeting the bride or groom chosen by their parents sometimes as late as their wedding day and hoping for the best. They recognize that the tradition is untenable in the United States, but still want to influence the process.

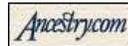
The banquet is considered one preferable alternative to going online, although that too is becoming more common. The event was unquestionably one of the big draws at the Islamic Society of North America's annual convention, which attracted thousands of Muslims to Chicago over Labor Day weekend, with many participants bemoaning the relatively small pool of eligible candidates even in large cities.

There were two banquets, with a maximum 150 men and 150 women participating each day for \$55 apiece. They sat 10 per table and the men rotated every seven minutes.

At the end there was an hourlong social hour that allowed participants time to collect e-mail addresses and telephone numbers over a pasta dinner with sodas. (Given the

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Muslim ban on alcohol, no one could soothe jumpy nerves with a drink.) Organizers said many of the women still asked men to approach their families first. Some families accept that the couple can then meet in public, some do not.

A few years ago the organizers were forced to establish a limit of one parent per participant and bar them from the tables until the social hour because so many interfered. Parents are now corralled along one edge of the reception hall, where they alternate between craning their necks to see who their adult children are meeting or horse-trading bios, photographs and telephone numbers among themselves.

Talking to the mothers — and participants with a parent usually take a mother — is like surveying members of the varsity suddenly confined to the bleachers.

“To know someone for seven minutes is not enough,” scoffed Awila Siddique, 46, convinced she was making better contacts via the other mothers.

Mrs. Siddique said her shy, 20-year-old daughter spent the hours leading up to the banquet crying that her father was forcing her to do something weird. “Back home in Pakistan, the families meet first,” she said. “You are not marrying the guy only, but his whole family.”

Samia Abbas, 59 and originally from Alexandria, Egypt, bustled out to the tables as soon as social hour was called to see whom her daughter Alia, 29, had met.

“I’m her mother so of course I’m looking for her husband,” said Mrs. Abbas, ticking off the qualities she was looking for, including a good heart, handsome, as highly educated as her daughter and a good Muslim.

Did he have to be Egyptian?

“She’s desperate for anyone!” laughed Alia, a vivacious technology manager for a New York firm, noting that the “Made in Egypt” stipulation had long since been cast overboard.

“Her cousin who is younger has babies now!” exclaimed the mother, dialing relatives on her cellphone to handicap potential candidates.

For doubters, organizers produced a success story, a strikingly good-looking pair of Chicago doctors who met at the banquet two years ago. Organizers boast of at least 25 marriages over the past six years.

Fatima Alim, 50, was disappointed when her son Suehaib, a 26-year-old pharmacist, did not meet anyone special on the first day. They had flown up from Houston especially for the event, and she figured chances were 50-50 that he would find a bride.

When she arrived in Texas as a 23-year-old in an arranged marriage, Mrs. Alim envied the girls around her, enthralled by their discussions about all the fun they were having with their boyfriends, she said, even if she was eventually shocked to learn how quickly they moved from one to the next and how easily they divorced. Still, she was determined that her children would chose their own spouses.

“We want a good, moderate Muslim girl, not a very, very modern girl,” she said. “The family values are the one thing I like better back home. Divorces are high here because of the corruption, the intermingling with other men and other women.”

For his part, Mr. Alim was resisting the strong suggestion from his parents that they switch tactics and start looking for a nice girl back in Pakistan. Many of the participants reject that approach, describing themselves as too Americanized — plus the visas required are far harder to obtain in the post-Sept. 11 world.

Mr. Alim said he still believed what he had been taught as a child, that sex outside marriage was among the gravest sins, but he wants to marry a fellow American Muslim no matter how hard she is to find.

"I think I can hold out a couple more years," he said in his soft Texas drawl with a boyish smile. "The sooner the better, but I think I can wait. By 30, hopefully, even if that is kind of late."

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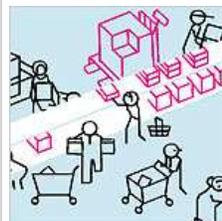
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