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Muslims Try to Balance Traditions, U.S. Culture on Path to Marriage

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Tuesday, May 27, 2008; B05

As imam of one of the Washington region's largest mosques, Mohamed Magid counsels married couples, including those with a problem he sees among Muslim Americans: husbands and wives who were virtual strangers before they wedded.

Islamic practice bans unsupervised dating, and in transient 2008 America, traditional Muslims may wind up far from families who once oversaw the connection of two single people. Many African American Muslims are converts and do not have Muslim relatives who can help with the process.

A few years ago, Magid, imam of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in Sterling, started something new: required premarital counseling for people who marry at the mosque. His wife recently launched a singles program meant to honor modesty and cut to the chase: participants meet in groups to discuss scriptural problems, read stories, and make lists of what they think are the most important characteristics for a Muslim wife or husband in the United States.

Although premarital counseling and singles programs are common for some faith groups, they are new in U.S. mosques, placing Magid and his wife on the vanguard of a drive to update Muslim practices and institutions surrounding marriage. The movement stems from concern among many Muslim American leaders that families are not keeping up with cultural changes, leading people to divorce and marry multiple times, or become alienated either from Islam or from mainstream American life.

Key issues include what Islam says about interfaith marriage, how well Muslims can know each another before they marry, and what the modern version is of a "wali," or guardian, a figure in Islam who is supposed to help women pick the right husbands.

"Generation gaps, cultural differences when people from the United States marry someone from overseas, interfaith marriage -- the issue of marriage is one of the most important in Islam here right now," Magid said. "Anytime there is a program at the mosque about these things, it's completely packed."

A commonly discussed problem is the surplus of single Muslim women. This stems partly from Islamic practice's broader acceptance of men marrying outside the faith than women.

Daisy Khan, a New York activist who counsels couples with her husband, an imam, organized a Valentine's Day event for singles -- 15 men and 63 women attended. Although she used to feel torn about interfaith marriage, she is now concerned that women will either be left unmarried or leave their faith. She tries to connect Muslim couples but also thinks pious Muslim women should be able to marry non-Muslims who also are pious.

"It's my obligation to shift a little, to give a little because it's important for them to stay within the faith," she said. "You have to clear up the mandate of: What is God's mission? I see God's hand in this."

In a [Pew Research Center](#) poll of Muslim Americans released last year, 54 percent of women said interfaith marriage is acceptable, compared with 70 percent of men.

Marriage practices are a growing issue among Muslims in part because melding into the mainstream is increasingly their goal, experts said. This is true for many first- and second-generation Muslims and U.S.-born converts. It is a complex balance, however, testing relations between parents and children and within new couples.

Many Muslim dating and marriage traditions exist to promote sexual reserve, particularly among women, but in 2008, separation between potential mates has lost its cultural moorings.

"It creates these experiences of weirdness where you're more comfortable with [non-Muslim] John at work than Mohamed" at the mosque, said Zarinah El Amin-Naeem, 28, an anthropologist.

The Muslim Alliance in North America, a national group made up largely of prominent black Muslims, held its first national conference in the fall and named marriage reform as one of its top priorities. A concern is the rush into marriage, either to have sex or because structures that once screened potential spouses, such as close-knit, large families and cultural isolation, have diminished.

"In Islamic culture there is no dating and no kind of middle ground, so the sense is, if this person is a good person, let's get married. The impulse isn't to prolong a courting relationship. Our advocacy is it needs to be prolonged somewhat," said Ihsan Bagby, co-founder of the Muslim Alliance in North America.

Issues related to marriage play out differently across the Muslim American community. The problem of strangers marrying is more common among African American Muslims than among immigrant families because many are converts and might not have families

involved in their faith lives, experts said. Tensions surrounding interfaith marriages are more common among Muslims from South Asia, who tend to be more traditional, than those from Africa or Turkey.

And, of course, many Muslims are secular or are liberal about their faith, perhaps using a Muslim dating Web site such as naseeb.com but not agonizing over premarital sex or seeking a wali. Even for non-observant Muslims, however, "when it comes to the issue of marriage, because Muslim families tend to be so involved, there is more tradition involved than in other aspects of their lives," said Dalia Mogahed, executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies.

Interfaith marriage is a huge topic with wide cultural ramifications. Because Islamic tradition, not law, holds that a Muslim man can intermarry but not a woman, a substantial gender gap in the dating pool has opened as children and grandchildren of immigrants have grown up.

The Koran says for Muslims to marry "believers," the meaning of which has long been the source of great debate but has been widely interpreted to include Christians and Jews. Although the Koran does not address the gender issue directly, tradition has held that women are more easily subjugated, and therefore a Muslim woman in an interfaith marriage could be forced by a Christian or Jew to live and raise her children outside of Islam, while a Muslim man in an interfaith relationship would be able to control the household's faith.

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, an Islamic family law expert at [Emory University](#), argues that gender dynamics have changed in a way that makes interfaith marriage more reasonable under Islamic tradition. "In social reality today, men are not dominant in the marriage relationship. The rationale of historic rule is no longer valid," he said. "But people are not willing to accept this. This is a major source of tensions."

Qur'an Shakir, who runs national Muslim dating events and writes a column on Muslim dating, said a lot of people debate the value of a dowry today, even as a symbolic commitment, while others think that the position of wali should be updated to be more like a relationship mentor and less like a guardian, and that men should have walis, too.

"People need to be open to different interpretations of the Koran," she said.

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