

young british muslims and relationships

Summary

Research report by the Muslim Youth Helpline

July 2010

Key Findings

This report presents a summary of the findings and recommendations arising from research conducted by the Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH), on the subject of relationships and young, British Muslims. Problems or concerns around 'relationships' has been the top issue as reported by callers to the helpline for the past five years, hence the focus of this report. The key findings are outlined below.

- **Boy-girl relationships**

Relationship problems between young people, including partners, spouses and more informal relationships are commonly reported: these may be exacerbated if a young person feels that they cannot discuss such relationships with their family and friends (especially if such relationships cross faith, cultural or ethnic boundaries.)

- **Marriage**

This category encompasses a diverse set of problems. Some young people wish to get married and are finding the process difficult; others want to stay single but are being pressured into marriage. This pressure is linked both to family and to wider society, especially for women. A consistent but limited proportion also describes being forced into marriage. Some of those who are married report marital problems, including domestic abuse.

- **Family**

Concerns relating to the family account for 10–15 percent of all relationship enquiries. A wide range of pressures are reported, from marriage to work and academic achievement. Prominent in our research were problems in the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, especially where the daughter-in-law has come from abroad and lacks a support network in Britain.

- **Community**

The wider Muslim community, including friends and extended families, can be a crucial factor in decision-making for young people, at times as a constraining influence. Some young people report being afraid to take certain decisions, such as divorcing their spouse, out of concern about the possible negative reaction of the community which could affect their family.

- **Sexual Abuse**

This is a small but consistent concern on the helpline. Most often, callers who report sexual abuse are adults who have been psychologically affected by abuse that took place when they were children. The helpline has also received calls where child sexual abuse is ongoing.

- **Sexuality**

Concerns over sexuality are fairly common, especially from young male callers. Such concerns can present acute problems for young people who feel pressure from their families and communities to enter into a traditional marriage

Summary

Recommendations

1. All service providers

Faith and cultural sensitivity

Identified as one of the most significant areas for improvement in mainstream services. Sensitivity to faith and culture is crucial in helping young people from Muslim communities with relationship problems. There is an urgent need to go beyond a merely abstract conception of the issues – service providers should try to understand how faith, culture and society interact in creating the framework within which choices are made for individual people. Such interaction can often vary substantially for different people and even for the same person at different stages in their life.

Knowledge and understanding of Muslim communities

Providers should make themselves aware of the basic tenets of the Muslim faith, as well as the ceremonies and traditions of the communities (such as the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities) with whom they are working.

Treating each person as an individual and avoiding stereotyping

Service providers, especially helpline workers, emphasised the negative role that stereotyping can play in service provision. In particular, participants criticised the stereotypes which pathologise the Muslim family, such as an exaggerated notion that young Muslim women lack freedom and have all choices made for them by male members of their family.

2. Statutory service providers

Helping with specific services needed (language barriers, female-only etc)

Statutory providers we spoke to emphasised the importance of providing adequate language services for recent immigrants who do not speak English, as a language barrier can make the provision of services much more difficult.

Access to female doctors was identified as an important need for some women who will not otherwise access services. Providers also suggested that more can be done for them to encourage women, especially those who are recent immigrants, to engage in social interaction and healthier lifestyles – such as by providing spaces for physical exercise and healthy cooking classes – which could significantly improve their health and the health of their families.

Training around faith and cultural sensitivity could be extended for some statutory providers. It was suggested that voluntary post-qualification training could be set up for doctors who wish to learn more about the communities with whom they are working, which could help them to provide a more holistic level of care. Examples of providers who have voluntarily undertaken to learn about diverse communities could be highlighted as examples of best practice.

3. Specialist Services

The need for more specialist services

The need for specialist services with a dedicated focus on Muslim communities in the UK was reiterated frequently in the research as one of the key ways to deal with the relationship problems of young Muslims. Some suggested specialist services to develop included listening, counselling and mediation services.

Conclusion

The report highlights the need for more support services like those provided by MYH, but also demonstrates how essential it is for mainstream and statutory agencies to develop the capacity to provide faith and culturally sensitive support to Muslim youth in the UK. The report also clearly demonstrates that to overcome the challenges they face, community engagement for the sake of engagement is a powerful tool when seeking to help young people from ethnic communities that experience high levels of disadvantage and deprivation, and who are more than likely to be discriminated against compared to their counterparts and other ethnic minority groups.

Faith and cultural sensitivity is outlined in the report as a series of basic guidelines, many of which will already be familiar to service providers, though perhaps not systematically applied. While it is crucial that providers working with Muslim communities understand both the principles of the religion and the specific cultural backgrounds of those with whom they are working, it is even more important that sensitivity does not stop there. This is because theoretical knowledge, without understanding how faith and culture matter in the lives of specific people, can actually be damaging by leading to stereotyping: Muslim women wearing headscarves as devoutly religious, for example, or Asian young people as subject to repressive households or automatically as members of large extended families.

A significant barrier to service provision as described by both service providers and service users in this report was precisely the idea – whether real or perceived – that they would not be understood as individuals, but would be essentialised into broad racial or religious categories. If young British Muslims are reluctant to access support from the mainstream for fear of being misunderstood, the results are likely to be experiences of further isolation and marginalisation. Thus, meaningful engagement and support – which is faith and culturally sensitive – can be empowering and transformative, helping young British Muslims to overcome barriers to social inclusion and have better access to the services and ultimately opportunities that promote good psychological and emotional wellbeing.

About MYH

The Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) is a registered, award-winning national charity which provides pioneering faith and culturally sensitive services to Muslim youth in the UK.

Our core service is a free and confidential emotional support service available nationally via the telephone, email, internet and through the post. The service uses male and female volunteers trained in active listening skills, all between the ages of 18 and 30 years, to respond to client enquiries.

As well as a dedicated helpline, MYH runs an online peer-support service based around a website (muslimyouth.net). Our aim is to encourage British Muslim youth to develop peer-support networks, and to access specialist and mainstream support services, to help them achieve social and mental well-being. We also run creative projects with diverse groups of young people in London.

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Additional information

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