

Causes of Family Breakdown amongst Muslim Communities in the West

Marriage is one of the most important relationships we will ever commit to in our life. It is a bond which influences and lies at the basis of many other significant relationships, for example the one we will have with our children and having grandchildren. Islam teaches us that marriage is also the only valid institution through which a man and a woman can enter an intimate relationship. When committing to such a relationship we have hopes of building a comforting relationship based on companionship, which will not only function as a building block to create a stable and righteous environment for the upbringing of children but also as a means to strengthen our relationship with our Creator (swt). «إِذَا تَزَوَّجَ الْعَبْدُ فَقَدْ اسْتَكْمَلَ نِصْفَ الدِّينِ فَلْيَتَّقِ اللَّهَ فِي النِّصْفِ الْبَاقِي» ***Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has told us that when a person marries, he has completed half of his religion and so he should fear Allah regarding the remaining half.*** [Al-Tirmidhi Hadith 3096 Narrated by Anas ibn Malik]

Sadly, the reality today in the West is that a lot of marriages within the Islamic community are breaking up and ending in divorce, and marriages that do survive are actually a far cry from the hopes stated above. A study in 2000, conducted within the Muslim community in the US, placed divorce rates at 30 percent. New studies seem to show that this percentage is rising and that problems related to the breakdown of family life are increasing within the Muslim community living in the West.

For this reason, it is imperative that we understand the dangers that lie within liberal Western societies especially those that lead to divorce. This way we can guard ourselves as much as possible against these factors and hopefully reduce the number of marriages breaking down within the Muslim community.

The concept of marriage varies significantly when comparing the Western liberal perspective to the Islamic view on marriage. In the West, marriage is something that is optional with regards to a man and woman entering into a relationship with each other because liberalism makes no reference to morality with regards to intimacy. It's left up to the individual whether one wishes to marry before entering an intimate relationship or to have a pre-marital relationship, a one-night stand or even an extra-marital relationship. These open doors to all kinds of relationships are making the institution of marriage vulnerable and actually undesirable. This idea of following one's whims and doing as one pleases in order to seek happiness is also influencing the Muslim community. We therefore see an array of reasons why and when Muslims actually do enter a marriage (e.g. pressure from the family and community, after having a long term pre-marital relationship or when one has their life in "order"). These reasons don't always find their origin within Islam and could also affect the success of a marriage, especially when both partners have different reasons for getting married.

When the concept of Marriage becomes infected with non-Islamic concepts, naturally this will lead to many problems. For instance, Marriage in the West has become a commercialized business, around which an enormous industry has

bloomed. The huge focus on the “big day” itself has also had its influence on the Muslim community. When an extravagant venue, overflowing food, latest bridal clothing, gold jewellery and expensive vehicles become “necessities” of the big day, many young couples are forced to put their marriage on hold or to take out haram loans. Consequently, this turns the wedding day into an obstacle to adhere to the Islamic rulings. Additionally, great emphasis put on high dowries are making it even more difficult for young couples to start married life. Putting so much emphasis on the day itself and giving into materialism, is making us forget the words of our Prophet (saw) when he said: «أعظم النساء بركة أيسرهن صداقا» ***“The one (amongst you, women) who receives the least amount of mahr is the most blessed (barakah).”*** [Reported by al-Haakim on the authority of Aisha]

The sad thing is that young couples in the West are starting their married life with a huge debt, straining the marriage with financial problems before it has even started. The seeds of materialism often continue on into the marriage, where Muslim couples also need to keep up with the “Joneses” or in this case the “Ahmed’s”. Being brought up in Western societies we also can get caught up in the rat race of consumerism often putting unnecessary strain on family life to uphold insignificant wants and to live up to expectations of a standard of living defined by others!

Furthermore, when couples aren’t advised from an Islamic point of view on marriage, aspects linked to Western liberal values will creep into the minds of these couples. For example, we see that the sexualisation of women in Western society are influencing marriages negatively. When women are presented as objects of desire and distorted sexualized images are spread through the entertainment business and the pornography industry, we not only create a highly sexualized society, we also create non-realistic expectations about what a relationship between a man and woman looks like and entails and what constitutes a beautiful woman and desirable man. Both men and women are affected by these images and ideas, often searching for these unrealistic expectations in a spouse, and turning away from them when they don’t measure up to these shallow standards. Furthermore, a study presented by the American Sociological Association in 2016 suggests that *divorce rates actually doubles when people start watching pornography*. Sex and pornography addiction is a real problem in Western societies and just like drugs and alcohol this pandemic has unfortunately secretly infiltrated the Muslim community too, making Muslim couples vulnerable for divorce. Sadly, there is a rise within the Muslim community in premarital relationships and also an increase in divorce due to extramarital relationships.

There is also confusion on the roles and rights of both husband and wife due to different ideas related to the different cultures they are living in - the Western culture to which many youngsters are attracted and the Eastern culture (which is often seen as Islamic) that many of our elders are influenced by. Muslims will often have a mix of ideas influenced by both non-Islamic cultures. This mixing of ideas is also the cause of friction between couples. For example if one of the partners prefers the western way of thinking where freedom and so-called gender equality of women is promoted, it becomes a problem when the spouse upholds more Eastern cultural ideas on women, who are perceived to be slaves to their husband, where her sole duty is fulfilling her husband’s every need. In reality, we see a mixture of ideas where the role

of the breadwinner and housemaker are both given to women. So she ends up suffering the strains of financially maintaining the family and continues to shoulder the household responsibilities. This subsequently has led to a devaluation of motherhood, the woman's prime role in Islam. We need to educate ourselves that there is a third option: Islam - which has clearly outlined the role and the rights of both partners in a marriage. The man is seen as the head of the household and therefore he is responsible for providing the financial maintenance and residence for his family. Whereas the main role of the wife is to be a homemaker and mother to her children. She may work outside the home but she should never see this as a must for her to do. Clearness on the rights and responsibilities of both men and women, as Islam provides, will actually be the key to creating harmony within the marriage.

In addition, when Muslim couples do encounter problems in marriage, we see that divorce is becoming much too easy an option to resolve their differences as is the case in the general societies of the West. In liberal societies, the view is often that marriages aren't necessarily meant to last; they should enhance our happiness and when this ceases to be the case, why should one stay in such a relationship? This is the way of thinking that results from the western liberal way of life where the individual's happiness is what should be prioritised over commitment or loyalty.

Finally, we must not forget that in Islam a wife is not a partner of her husband; rather, she is seen as his companion. Their living together is therefore not based on partnership but rather on companionship and they become complete companions of each other in all respects. *Companionship is where one finds repose and tranquillity in the other. Allah has made marriage a source of tranquillity for both spouses.*

﴿هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا﴾

“It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in comfort with her.” [Al-A'raf: 189]

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