

A change in Muslims' attitudes is inevitable

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Inayat Bunglawala: Commentary

Helping your children to find good marriage partners and to settle down and build stable family units is regarded in Islam as one of the most important duties of Muslim parents, and indeed all parents.

In recent years, though, there have been a number of cases where young women say that they have been coerced to marry someone when they did not wish to do so. Often it is seen by some family members as a mechanism by which additional members of an extended family can be brought into the UK.

It is crucial, however, that we are able to distinguish between forced marriages and the common practice of assisted marriages, whereby parents help their children to find a life partner but where the final decision is made by the young people themselves.

As many young Muslims will avoid mixing in pubs and nightclubs for religious reasons, their social circle may be small. Their parents should be able to help to introduce them to a wider circle through their own friends and acquaintances.

As good marriages are meant to symbolise the coming together of two families and not just two individuals, the parents' concern should be perfectly understandable.

Still, some change in attitudes and mores among Muslims living in the West is inevitable. In the United States, for example, one of the most popular events at the huge annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America has been the "matrimonial banquet" where young men and women meet and speak with each other at a table for seven minutes before being rotated to meet other potential partners.

Clearly modelled on speed-dating events - although the organisers dare not call it that - even here parents often tag along partially at least to influence their children's choice of marriage partner.

In the UK, leading Islamic organisations have made it clear that the Nikah (Islamic marriage) ceremony is effected quite simply by the two essential components of offer and acceptance. If a marriage offer is accepted without the free consent of either party then it is regarded as null and void. So it is important that forced marriages are not seen as a religious problem - this is a

global human rights issue.

One of the best ways to eradicate this criminal practice is by education of young women with the emphasis on prevention.

Forced marriages are by no means peculiar to Muslim families. The Government's Forced Marriages Unit say that they deal with 300 cases per year involving people from a number of countries and faith backgrounds.

Inayat Bunglawala is assistant secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain