

The Muslim Marriage Crisis: How Re-Establishing Islamic Principles Can Help Muslims Find Love and Marriage

Tahirah Nailah Dean*

Muslims in the United States are living through a challenging time. Not only are we confronting major social, moral, and ethical issues wrapped into the consciousness of American culture that conflict with Islamic principles, but we are also facing our own mortality. With high suicide rates and increasing drug and alcohol addictions, many of our youth are being lost to preventable deaths.

Another major issue is the destabilization of the family unit. The divorce rate is steadily rising due to the lack of premarital education and due to abuse, and more Muslims are choosing to remain unmarried. Although it has yet to be formally studied by social scientists and journalists, the term “Muslim marriage crisis” has been making headway in the last decade. And what exactly is this crisis? A startling number of single Muslims who are not getting married at the same rates and ages as previous generations.

As a child, I never imagined the road to marriage would be so challenging. Growing up, I used my parents, who met in college and married at a young age, as a guiding star for my own pursuits. It wasn’t until I graduated from college and then law school that I realized how difficult it would be to meet a practicing Muslim man for marriage.

I began to seek help in the community. The predominantly Arab and South Asian mosques I found myself in after graduation, although spiritually nurturing, were not as willing to provide me, as a Black American, with many prospects. I was often told that even men who prioritized finding a spouse centered on Islamic values had a stronger desire to find someone with overlapping cultural and ethnic similarities. As I continued my search over the next several years, I gradually learned that even my level of education and my age created more barriers to finding someone. However, in being more vocal about my struggles to find love and marriage as an educated Black Muslima in her late twenties, I came to understand that my situation was not unique.

In 2020, I began writing about my experiences and those of the women I had met online or through close-knit social circles, blogs, and various publications. My article, “The Hidden Racism in the Muslim Marriage Market,”¹ was published in *Al Jazeera*. People from across the country and world poured out their hearts to me about their efforts to get married and being told that their ethnic backgrounds put them at the bottom of the barrel. I began interviewing women on Muslim courtship and marriage and quickly discovered

* Tahirah Nailah Dean is a lawyer by day and a writer by night about the difficulties of finding love and marriage as a young Muslim woman. Her work has appeared in *Al Jazeera* and *Insider*. She is also a blogger for a popular Muslim marriage app and is currently working on a novel. To learn more about her work, see <https://www.nailahdean.com/>.

¹ The full article can be found at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/8/20/the-hidden-racism-of-the-muslim-marriage-market>.

that cultural baggage perpetuated other problems, among them sexism and ageism, for those seeking a spouse.

After interviewing dozens of Muslim women aged 25 to 35, I realized the existence of three recurring barriers: ageism, racism, and sexism. Their stories, coupled with my own experience, led me to create a photo series called the Isms Project,² which launched in 2021, to shine a light on the Muslim marriage crisis from the perspective of American Muslimas. Because we live in such a digital-centered world, I knew that an online photo series and accompanying mini-documentary would be a great way to humanize the issue.

I found four Muslim women whose stories evoked the themes I wanted to highlight. Myself and a small team of Muslima creatives symbolized what it meant to experience these “isms” in pursuit of marriage. Using props, unique settings, and elaborate costumes, we told their stories. At the bottom of each photo, we provided a quote from the woman that helped tell her story. Each woman had two photos: one captured her struggle with the “ism,” and the other one told of her struggle to free herself from it.

Racism and Colorism

In the photo we created to represent the isms of racism and colorism, two women – one South Asian and one Black – stand apart looking into mirrors. One struggles with colorism and the other struggles with racism as she attempts to find a spouse. Together, their stories about the nasty encounters with their own family members and within their community when it comes to racism and colorism are bite-sized testaments to the difficulties many people face while pursuing marriage.

It is a shameful, but evident truth that this country’s Muslim community struggles with ethnocentrism, racism, and colorism. Institutions like Muslim ARC have been created to dismantle the issues we face in and out of our mosques. Despite increased discussions about our failures from prominent religious scholars and teachers, divisions over marriage remain in place. Whenever families or matchmakers begin the process of finding suitable matches for a young man or woman, they begin with that person’s racial or ethnic background. When a young person brings home someone outside of their ethnic group, the match is rejected, citing cultural incompatibility as one reason, or sometimes giving few or no reasons at all.

While commonalities in culture and language are important determinants when it comes to preserving a marriage, they should not be the sole or primary factors used to find love and marriage. In the U.S., where the number of self-identifying Muslims is just 1%, shopping around for a spouse from one’s familial home country is difficult. Selecting a spouse solely based on ethnic and racial identifiers also neglects two crucial perspectives: (1) Muslims born and raised in the U.S. have an overlapping culture when it comes to this country’s media, food, and language. While there may be a strong pride to protect and preserve one’s culture, the stronger affinity is often to those customs and traditions that are intrinsic to living in the U.S.; and (2) our faith encourages us to use religiosity as the primary indicator for a good spouse. Our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said,

² For more information about the Isms Project, see <https://www.nailahdean.com/the-isms-project-nd>.

Women may be married for four things: their wealth, their lineage, their beauty and their religious commitment. Choose the one who is religiously committed, may your hands be rubbed with dust (i.e., may you prosper). (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 5090)

We are also reminded that it is a blessing from Allah that He created us in diverse forms. We are told in Qur’ān 49:13, “O humanity. We created you from a single [pair] of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other.” When we select a spouse solely based on race, ethnicity or color, we ignore these teachings.

Sexism

The photo from the Isms Project that represents sexism tells the tale of a woman who does not want to choose between her education/career goals and becoming a wife and mother. She recognizes that there is room for a balanced approach and that Islam presents amazing female role models to encourage us to take on dynamic roles. The photo attempts to capture the idea that it is cultural baggage from Arab, South Asian, and even African cultures that often limit a woman’s role to one or the other.

In my conversations with Muslim women who are successful in their careers and armed with multiple degrees and impressive resumes, I learned that they struggled to find solid marriage prospects. Although Islam encourages women to become educated and take on different roles, Muslimas in the U.S. seem to be pigeonholed by matchmakers, men, or sometimes just their mothers. In addition, there is an assumption that her accolades will prevent her from being a “good” wife. I have heard countless complaints from female doctors, lawyers, and engineers that the men they met were intimidated by their aspirations or achievements or made unfair assumptions about how their future lives would operate if their future wives continued on the paths they were on. It was as if women who had reached a certain age and established themselves in their careers were lesser candidates.

The reality for couples in the U.S. today is quite different. Oftentimes, both the mother and father share in the household tasks and their career aspirations. Husbands are now sharing in household chores and childrearing duties that were once seen as belonging to a wife or mother only. We can take comfort in that such an approach reflects that of the Prophet (peace be upon him), who also did household chores. Similarly, the *sīrah* shows us that the women surrounding our beloved Prophet (pbuh), such as his wives Khadīja and ‘Ā’isha (may Allah be pleased with them both), were multi-faceted. Collectively, they embodied the roles of wife, mother, businesswoman, and scholar/teacher. By educating ourselves about their lives and learning what makes a successful marriage, we can make better informed choices when it comes to finding a spouse. Both men and women must fight the urge to solely focus on their career, and at the same time avoid making assumptions about someone’s potential when it comes to marriage before speaking to them.

Ageism

In the photo that represents ageism, we attempted to present a woman who has been labeled “expired goods.” Now in her thirties, she remains unmarried and unwanted. Instead of being connected to men in her age bracket, she is passed over and blamed for focusing too much on her education/career goals. Because of this stigma, she feels pressured to find someone, anyone, primarily based on the fear of getting passed over as she gets older.

Age discrimination is a reality for Muslimas over the age of twenty-five who are looking for a spouse. Although Islam recommends a more holistic approach to finding a suitable match, it appears that women today are most valued for their fertility and beauty. During my conversations with Muslim women, I listened to stories of women who were passed over when they reached their late twenties. In asking the obvious question about why she decided to wait to actively search for a spouse, I heard tales about their mothers – women who had married young, moved with their husbands to the U.S. and started having children. Those matriarchs never had the opportunity to find fulfilling professions and establish a name for themselves other than “Ammi,” and so they coaxed and primed their American-born daughters to do more, see more, and be more. Therefore, they raised a generation of women who prioritized education/career over finding a spouse. Even though the boys in many families were encouraged to focus on education/careers, it appears that they were not penalized for doing so because they have no clear “expiration date,” like women.

In defense of their decisions to cherry pick based on a woman’s age, I often hear the excuse about concerns for a woman’s fertility. Although this is an important consideration, it is not a fair one, for the same families who encourage their daughters to work toward professional goals often encourage their sons to wait and then select younger wives. Muslim families must come to an understanding of what it means for their children to delay marriage and the implications of doing so.

A Path Forward

After hearing the positive reactions from both the men and the women of different generations who viewed the photos, I see a path forward. Men wrote to me, saying that they were going to think twice before passing on a woman due to something like her race or age. I was pleasantly surprised to hear such comments. While my target audience was men, I was pleased to receive numerous messages from women who said they felt heard and even validated. They no longer wanted to blame themselves for their failed attempts or years of singleness. They felt at peace because they realized that it was not their “fault,” that they were part of a larger phenomenon: that of cultural stigmas hindering potential matches.

Another important impact of the Isms Project was that it showcased Islam’s positive attitudes toward women. So often Muslimas are portrayed as objects of oppression in Western media. The Isms Project was picked up by the *Washington Post*,³ *AJ+*,⁴

³ See <https://www.thelily.com/some-muslim-american-women-say-they-are-facing-a-marriage-crisis-these-photos-tell-their-stories/>.

⁴ See <https://twitter.com/ajplus/status/1443958885245538310>.

Newsweek,⁵ and similar publications. Each reviewer mentioned how it is culture, not the Islamic tradition, that is harming women's marriage prospects. These articles helped showcase strong Muslim women who loved their religion, knew their worth, and were willing to wait for God-fearing men who appreciate and accept them as they are.

Although I experienced feelings of shock, sorrow, and even anger when I heard the many disappointing experiences of Muslimas trying – and failing – to find a spouse, I do believe there is hope. As a community, we can do better by taking proactive steps to resolve this crisis. I believe the answer lies in increased dialogue about the discrimination that occurs in our community, particularly in regard to women. These conversations must be initiated by our religious leaders. American Islamic institutions must step-up to educating not only young Muslims looking to get married, but also their parents, about the best practices to select a spouse, with a focus on discouraging ageism, sexism, racism, and colorism. We need frank conversations and increased premarital workshops that prioritize Islam over culture. In doing so, we can demonstrate the beauty of intercultural marriages. We can share stories about the dynamic women that surrounded the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions, as well as dispel the stigma that women have an “expiration date,” and instead focus on valuing *adab* and a God-centered approach to life. Through conversation and education, we can bring people closer together and perpetuate the growth and stability of this country's Muslim families.

⁵ See <https://www.newsweek.com/black-muslim-women-are-fighting-uphill-battle-while-dating-1656558>.