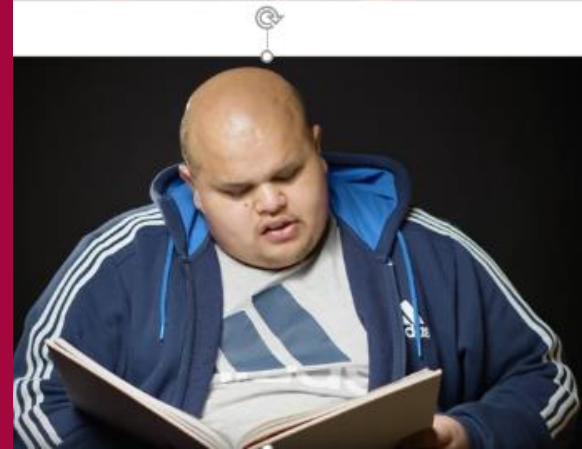




Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Storying Sexual Relationships

Young British Muslims Speak and Write on Sex and Love



The
University
Of
Sheffield.



INTERIM SUMMARY REPORT

This interim* report summarizes the findings of a research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which collected data between 2016 and 2019. This report includes links to more detailed publications and films from the project, most of which are free to access online. *A more detailed report will be circulated at a later date.

Research Participants and Partners

This report includes quotations from interviews and creative writing by young British Muslims. Names have been changed, for ethical reasons. However, some participants did choose to read their own creative writing to camera for videos that would be posted online, and in doing so they chose to reveal their identities. Links to these videos are included in this report.

This project was conducted in partnership with organisations including:

- Glasgow Women's Library, Glasgow
- Hemer Youth Group, Rochdale
- EMTEP (Ethnic Minorities Training & Education Project), North East
- And others who wish to remain anonymous.

Partners include: Saara Sharawi; John Siddique; Afshan D'Souza Lohdi; Faiza Yousaf; Talat Yaqub; Stacy Bias; Atta Yaqub, Mohammad Barber

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Contents

Introduction

1. It's hard to talk
2. Finding ways to speak
3. Pressure to marry
4. Single life
5. Choosing marriage
6. Sex and love

Conclusions: Making choices



Image: Creative writing workshop in progress at Glasgow Women's Library.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the findings of a three-year research project, which investigated sexual attitudes and practices among young British Muslims. The project asked:

- How do young British Muslim men and women feel about and experience sexual relationships?
- What choices are they identifying and making in this respect?
- How are young British Muslims talking – and writing – about sex and love?
- What are their experiences of romantic love and sexual pleasure?
- In what ways are Muslims' sexual relationships attitudes and practices different from those of other young British people? In what ways are they the same?

The project, entitled 'Storying Sexual Relationships', explores ways in which young Muslims speak and write about experiences of and attitudes towards sex and relationships. The term 'storying' refers to the wide range of ways in which they do this: in conversations with friends and family; in hearsay and information, the young people pass on to each other; in poems and short stories they write, and those they encounter in the printed word or online.

WHO WILL BE INTERESTED?

Young British Muslims are making choices about how to live their sexual lives: about whether dating is ok; how to meet a potential partner; whether, when and how to marry; what to expect from marriage. These subjects are often unspoken. Within families and communities sex and sexual relationships are shrouded in secrecy and silence. Bringing some of these sexual subjects into view, this project will interest young Muslims who are seeking to identify choices and make decisions about their own sexual lives.

The sexual attitudes and practices of British Muslims are also in the public eye. National conversations about a range of issues – women's rights, gay rights, immigration, integration, sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation – direct attention to the sex lives of Muslims. All too often, these debates trade in stereotypes, depicting Muslims in unflattering light: as repressed and unhappy, and all too often as dangerous to themselves and to others. Some of these stereotypes are racist; others are simply inaccurate. A more accurate picture of the ways in which Muslims live their sexual lives is therefore important to develop.

Research Methods

This research provides insights into how young Muslims think and speak about sexual relationships. Working with a relatively small number of participants, and exploring their experiences and in detail, this project involved two main methods:

- Interviews with young British Muslim men and women. We interviewed around 60 individuals, aged 16-30, in Yorkshire, Glasgow, and Newcastle.
- Creative reading and writing workshops, in which 12 groups of 6-8 young Muslim men and women explored relationship stories and ways of talking and writing about sex and love.

To find out more about how we did the research, and meet some of the participants, you can watch our short documentary film, [Meaningful research through creative writing](#), and read an article about one of our creative workshops: ['Critical collaborative storying: making an animated film about halal dating'](#).

Overview of findings

For many young British Muslims, it is hard for to talk about sex and love. This matters because talking is a way of identifying and making choices. But we also found that young Muslims are finding ways to articulate – speak and write – about sexual relationships. Speaking about sexual desire and relationships, they are making their own ways in life and love. This does not mean anything goes, but it can mean that more is possible. We hear, for example, from a young man speaking to an Imam about his same-sex desire; and being pleasantly surprised by the hearing he gets.

But we also hear of pressure: to marry, to be heterosexual, to conform. Some of this pressure is cultural, traceable to heritage in kinship and community groups, while some of it is religious; in practice, cultural and religious traditions are often difficult to distinguish. Despite these pressures, some young Muslims are finding ways to postpone marriage, and thus to live as single adults. Some are also finding ways to negotiate the kinds of introductions and marriages they want, and the question of whether they should marry at all. Dong so, some are finding romantic love and sexual fulfilment.

And so, by finding new ways to speak and write about sex and love, young British Muslims are negotiating pressures from within their families and communities, and confounding some of the wider society's unsympathetic – sometimes racist – stereotypes about them.

For a more detailed overview of this project, see: [“Sexual misery’ or ‘Happy British Muslims’? Contemporary depictions of Muslim sexuality’](#).

1. IT'S HARD TO TALK

For many young British Muslims, it is hard for to talk about sex and love. This silence has consequences. Since talking about this delicate subject can be a way of identifying and making choices, not talking about it can have the opposite effect.

Of course, Muslims are not alone in finding it hard to speak about sex and love, though they face particular obstacles in doing so, given the understanding that, as Waheed put it, “In our culture, sex is forbidden before marriage” (Waheed, 21, Interview). Given Waheed’s understanding that sex outside marriage is categorically forbidden, there seems to be little to say about it, at least in the presence of families and within in communities. Though some young Muslims do find it possible to raise this subject with friends, silences persist in many areas. Consequently, many Muslims embark upon married life without preparation for their wedding nights, and with vague if high expectations. Nazia explores this point in her creative writing:

“The dream man, the dream proposal, the dream dress. Expectations look and feel different for every couple around the globe but one expectation rings true for each couple: sex.”
(Nazia, age not stated, Creative writing)

And, if it is hard to talk about marital sex, other forms of sex are even more difficult. Muslims face a particular set of obstacles in this respect in talking about same-sex desire. These obstacles added to the trepidation, which Yusuf experienced, when he was trying to open up to an Imam, “a guy who was at the heart of the kind of Muslim establishment” where he lives. Worried about the response he might receive, Yusuf held back. The Imam sensed that something important needed to be said, so he pressed Yusuf.

“And I said ‘No, no, no, don’t worry about it, it’s fine, I’m not going to tell you’. And he said ‘No, tell me’ and that went on for a bit.” (Yusuf, 22, Interview)

Another, more banal form of sexual relationship – dating – illustrates the silence and secrecy that surround most aspects of sexual relationships within Muslim families and communities. Many young Muslims assume – and some have been taught – that dating is religiously impermissible (haram) and that it should not be openly discussed or practiced.

This does not mean that Muslims do not date. Some date discretely, saying one thing and doing another, or simply saying nothing at all. Aisha explains, without implicating herself personally:

“[M]ost of my friends have had boyfriends and it has been like they have had a double life, so they are hiding it from home. And then they just pretending to meet the girl next door to go to town, but that will be how they meet...their boyfriend” (Aisha, 27, Interview)

And yet, while the sometimes-unwritten rule against speaking about dating does not hold everyone back, this silence and secrecy can be damaging and inhibiting for some, as can other obstacles to free speech on this subject. Where people feel free to speak about delicate subjects such as these, they also feel free to explore their options, as we shall see later in this report.

Participants in this project made a short animated film, [Halal Dating: An animated conversation](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/storyingrelationships) (see the screenshot image below). This film explored the difficulty of talking about meeting and dating, given expectations that Muslims will not only not date; they will not even talk about the possibility of doing so.



2. FINDING WAYS TO SPEAK

Some young British Muslims are finding ways to speak – and write – about sexual relationships. One way they are doing this is by speaking out about dating. By talking and writing – with friends, and sometimes with families, as well as online and in virtual conversations – they are exploring ways in which dating might be religiously permissible (halal).

Halal dating is often seen as dating in which there is no physical contact between the couple, and in which a chaperone is present. It also means meeting with marriage in mind. Some do this over the phone or through the internet, circumventing the need for a chaperone. Speaking in this way allows young people to justify the choices they are making. Not everyone is convinced though:

“Call it halal dating and say that oh, we’re not going to touch or be intimate so there’s nothing wrong with it.” (Zarah, age 22, Interview).

To find out about this subject, see: [‘Critical collaborative storying: making an animated film about halal dating’](#) and: [“Halal dating”: Changing relationship attitudes and experiences among young British Muslims’](#).

It can be liberating to break silences. When Yusuf plucked up the courage to speak to an Imam about being gay, he was pleasantly surprised by the response he received.

“And then eventually I told him ‘Well don’t blame me but you asked to know, so I’m going to tell you’ and I told him. And he didn’t really react. You know, I’ve always got this preconception that they’re just going to go (gasps) shock and horror and all that kind of stuff, and he wasn’t and he didn’t. He was like ‘Okay, which persons have you spoken to about this?’ And I was like ‘None, no-one, who am I going to speak to? Who have I got to speak to?’ He was far more understanding of it.” (Yusuf, 22, Interview).

This conversation put Yusuf’s mind at rest and gave him courage to broach the subject – however tentatively and tenderly – to the young man he had desired for more than a year. To find out what happened when he did this, watch Yusuf tell his story: [‘What if?’](#)

Finding ways to talk: writing and telling stories



Image: Faizaan reads from his story about a date: [Dreams](#)

Finishing their meal, they head out of the restaurant. It's still early for a Tuesday night for the both of them at only 9pm. They didn't want to leave each other's company so soon but they didn't want to make one another out as if they were needy or clingy.

"I parked near the library, can you take me back there please?" said Sarah.

"Yeah, we'll go now. It's been a good night, I'm glad we went together."

"You're right, to be honest I was going to go it alone but I'm glad I had someone to go with."

"Likewise" replied Simon, smiling.

As they drive home, Simon notices Sarah looking out at Chill Factor again. This time it's dark and Simon can see her attention is fixed on it.

"You ever been?" he asks.

"I've always wanted to go. Apart from the cinema or eating I wouldn't usually think to go somewhere like this." says Simon.

They continue to talk all the way back to library. As Sarah is about to leave the car, she turns to him and crosses her left leg over her right knee whilst placing her right elbow on the armrest of the car. She rests her head in her right hand, puts her left hand on the armrest and starts tapping each consecutive finger from her smallest finger to the thumb.

"We should do this again Si. I've had fun."

3. PRESSURE

Most young British Muslims experience pressure to marry a person of the opposite sex, approved by the family, and do so while they are young (for most, this means before the end of their twenties), and to do so in accordance with marriage customs.

Pressure to marry comes in different forms, which include instructions, advice, questions, introductions, and unsolicited assistance.

Some pressure is cultural, while some is religious. We explain this point in more detail in an article, available online: [‘Mobilising Pakistani heritage, approaching marriage’](#). In practice, cultural and religious traditions are often difficult to distinguish, though many young British Muslims try to do so, with increasing numbers seeking paths that prioritise religious convictions over cultural traditions.

These marriage traditions lead some young Muslims to marry people they hardly know, followed by awkward honeymoons, which turn out better for some than for others. Safa remembers this early awkwardness:

“I remember when we first sat down after we were married, and we went for our first meal out, and we had nothing to talk about like we were just silent and really shy.” (Safa, 22, Interview)

Those who give in to this pressure have mixed experiences. For some, marriage leads to romantic love and sexual fulfilment, and then perhaps later to the mixed emotions and dynamics that characterise longer-term relationships: the alternation between romantic and practical experiences, the harmony and bickering, that many couples will recognise.

“[Y]ou can say love a person when you get married on the first day you know, [but] love will come after four or five years and then you can say.” (Arshad, 29, Interview)

Pressure to conform to heterosexual marriage

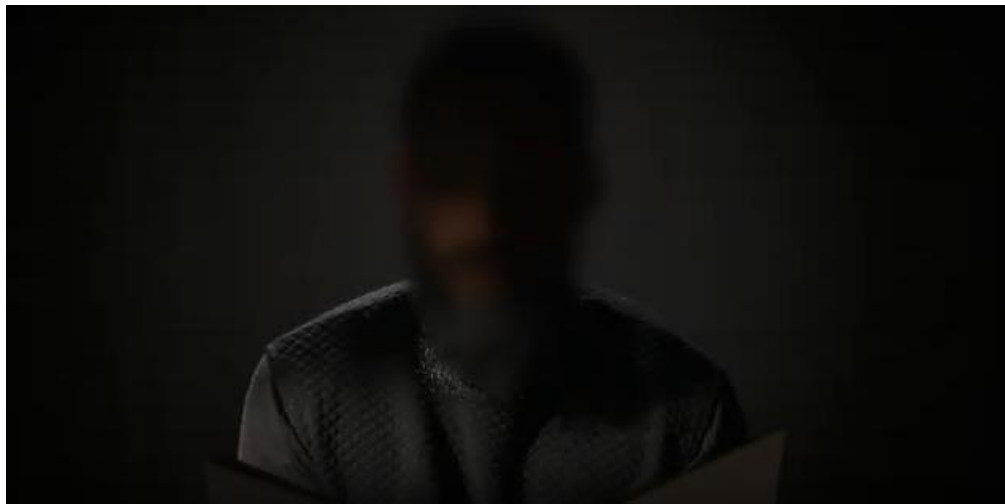


Image: The author of '[Qabool](#)' – which translates as 'I accept' or 'I do' – chose to remain anonymous, while reading his story. He tells of pressure to marry, which he feels has ruined his protagonist's life, and presumably that of his wife. The protagonist been in a gay relationship, which he could not tell his father about.

"Qabool". The biggest mistake I have ever made. The craziest decision I ever took. A simple word damning me to hell. Who would have thought that one word could change the course of your life?!

It used to be so lovely watching the beautifully dressed, meticulously powdered women on the TV channel, *Star Plus*, play joyfully with their loving husband on their neat and tidy King sized bed. I used to get a thrill when the 6ft 2inch, broad shouldered man would rescue the innocent, attention-seeking women in the Hollywood movies. Don't get me started on the excitement I used to bottle in when the athletic, fair-skinned Indian couples used to dance incredibly under the glowing rain in a precisely executed routine. How wrong I was about relationships.

I didn't understand that two completely different specimens with the different lifestyles coming together would be a test. Coming together, sharing the same bed, the same toilet, the same living space under one testing roof. It was so different when we used to meet at Nando's and share the same glass of Pepsi. Back to my drama. I thought it would be sweet and romantic like the times we used to speak on the phone till 3AM in the morning.

4. SINGLE LIFE

Some young Muslims are finding ways to be single by postponing marriage, perhaps indefinitely, perhaps just for a few years.

Muslims are often portrayed as passing from childhood to married life in the blink of an eye. Those living for a time as single adults contradict the stereotype of the Muslim who is either a child or a married adult.

For some, being single is a time of freedom and exploration. Tahir saw this as a time to find himself, with no hurry to enter a serious relationship.

“My focus is to sort myself out right now. Stop smoking and stuff like that. But if I do meet someone at college, I will be all right with it.” (Tahir, 20, Interview)

Others, like Noura, admit to anxieties about single life. In her blog, she comments that being single can be a time of loneliness, pressure, and worry about whether the right (or wrong) person will come along.

“As a young woman, I have concerns about entering into a relationship. Most of us do, it's a given. Will it work? Will it be magical? Will we argue?” (Noura, 28, Blog)

For some young Muslims, singlehood is a time of pleasure and anxiety, exploration and discovery, and a prelude to the settled relationship, which most expect or hope for.

There are two differences between Muslims and other single young adults. First, most young Muslims equate single life with celibacy, and tend not to admit to pre-marital sex. Second, for most Muslims, single life comes to a relatively early and sometimes abrupt end.

Exploring sex and relationship possibilities, while still single



Image: Mariam, reading [Finding your Power](#)

As a young woman, I have concerns about entering into a relationship. Most of us do, it's a given. Will it work? Will it be magical? Will we argue? The biggest fear before entering a relationship is the worry that it won't be equal. The biggest fear, before entering a relationship is that it wouldn't be equal that for me, is losing myself. But most young Muslim women face that challenge nearly every day, with the whole aspect of religion, culture and the 'do' and 'don't' factor thrown in. The fear of losing our voice in a relationship, the ability to make our own decisions, but most importantly, our freedom. That's what is at stake.

This isn't just a big thing for me. I'm sure most of us, no matter what our background, have these genuine concerns before we enter a relationship. Sounds like a contract doesn't it. If it was, I'd have an escape clause. Even today Muslim women are faced with marriage. then comes the relationship. A lot of us are breaking this tradition and fighting for our equal rights as partners and wives and more importantly, as women. Wanting a relationship BEFORE marriage, to get to know our future partners, before we take the plunge. It is possible now.

But once in that relationship, most of us feel as though we will lose who we are. Our independence.

5. CHOOSING MARRIAGE

Young British Muslims are also finding ways to negotiate the kinds of marriages they want, the ways in which they want to find their spouse, and the question of whether they should marry at all.

Traditionally, most have entered into arranged marriages. Arranged marriage customs can be traced back to South Asian and African cultures in which British Muslims have heritage. (See: [‘Mobilising Pakistani heritage, approaching marriage’](#)).

Some young people are embracing traditional arrangements. They are allowing their families to introduce them to possible husbands and wives. Typically, after discussions between two families, a young woman’s family invite suitable men and their families to visit.

“[I]t’s funny because my friend did the exact same thing [introductions] as what I had done but ended up getting married to the person, she liked him” (Hiba, 27, Interview)

Others are finding new ways to meet potential partners, and are more assertively making their own decisions about how to initiate and conduct relationships. Arshad explained:

“[Y]ou can meet anybody in the street, you meet people who go out, you socialise, you go to events you know, you go to Islamic talks you know, [...] there’s a lot of things happen in this day and age that you can meet people.” (Arshad, 29, Interview)

Our research restated the differences between arranged and forced marriages – the two should not be confused because arranged marriages always include elements of choice, with the right of refusal.

Whichever position they take – whether seemingly traditional, or more obviously contemporary – young Muslims are making choices of their own, rather than falling victim to traditions and bossy relatives.

Having a say: expressing frustrations and wishes

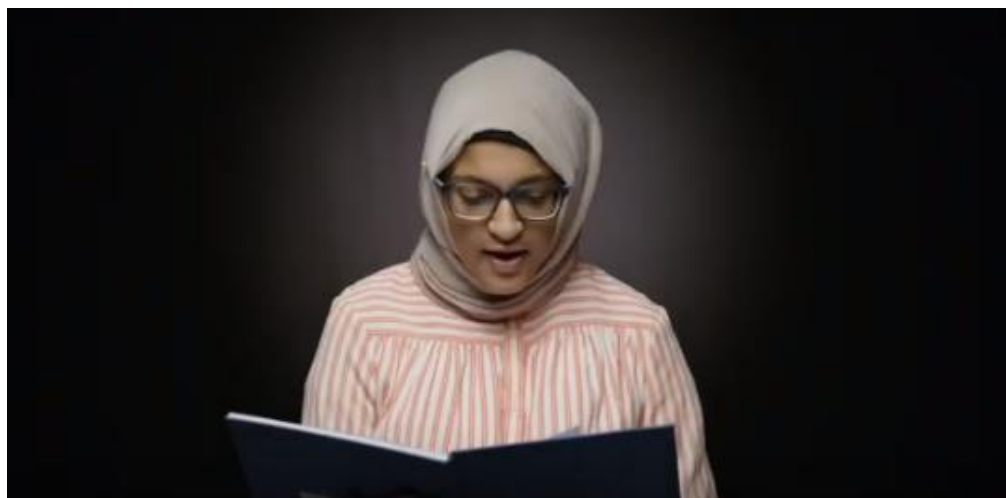


Image: Inaya reading [‘Chapter 1: Hannah’s rishta’](#)

“You guys are so focused on getting Hanna a rishta that I feel that you guys have forgotten about me,” Mariam said honestly, betraying her sadness.

“Beta, I have told you many times that after we get Hanna married, we will do the same for you. Anyway there’s no rush. You’ve got plenty of time,” Mum said, with a smile.

“Mum, I’m 25 years old, coming up for 26! How am I going to find someone if you guys are only focused on getting Hanna a rishta?” Mariam complained.

“Beta, don’t worry. You have many cousins back home in Pakistan. You can marry one of them.” Mum said distractedly.

“But I don’t want to marry a cousin back home,” Mariam objected.

“Listen beta, I don’t have time for this, our guests will be here soon,” Mum said looking a little annoyed.

“But mum–”

“That’s enough,” Mum cut Mariam off. There was complete silence. Mariam didn’t say a word as her mum busied herself in arranging the food in trays, ignoring their conversation. With a sigh of resignation, Mariam moved forward to help her.

6. SEXUAL LOVE

Young Muslims are seeking and finding sexual love. They are experimenting with sexual experiences and possibilities, and exploring their sexualities.

These findings confound some wider stereotypes, which depict Muslims as unhappily married and sexually unfulfilled. See: [“‘Sexual misery’ or ‘Happy British Muslims’? Contemporary depictions of Muslim sexuality’](#).

Some experience love more fully and happily than others; some more easily and with fewer complications. So there is something universal – not uniquely Muslim – about the references to love that emerged through this project:

“I was in love, I thought I was finally getting my cheesy chick flick moment. I remember the butterflies in my stomach, how I couldn’t eat or sleep and the way my mind would wander as I imagined our future.” (Farah, 25, Creative writing)

Muslims tell some more distinctive tales too. Many speak of love after marriage. For some, this involves courting after commitment, going on dates and taking time to know each other.

While – as we have seen – many unmarried and newly married Muslims are sexually inexperienced, and feel sexually ignorant, some are finding ways to talk about sex. Hanifa’s mother broached this delicate subject by leaving popular romance books around the house: “she knew I would want to read them” (Hanifa, 22, Interview).

Others are broaching this subject more directly. Under the cloak of online anonymity, as well as among peers, and through indirect and non-confessional means such as creative writing. Talibah joked, through about her patchy sex life: “I’m talking about sex. When was the last time? Do you even remember?” (Talibah, 36, creative writing).

Finding ways to talk about sex: blogging



Image: Zarina (not her real name) reading from her blog on '[Anal Sex](#)'

Anal sex: Sexual activity involving penetration of the anus. In other words, “taking it up the arse”. Anal sex can often raise a few eyebrows and also tickle a few parts, the ever increasing popularity and normalisation of “sex in the butt” (thank you urban dictionary) is something which I find puzzling yet also a bit titillating. With many religions and cultures heavily discouraging the practice it is no wonder it can be called a fetish. And as humans it can be quite invigorating doing something that you know you shouldn't be.

As a young Muslim female I knew I might eventually come across this issue at some point in my marriage so I felt it would be better to enter the situation prepared. Well as prepared as I could be. Unsurprisingly when embarking on my research, I found the question of anal sex being permissible in Islam having been asked quite a lot. The slow advent of readily available free porn of all genres is probably one of the reasons for it. Positions and sexual fetishes that people probably never knew existed are now all readily available on the big screen. Oh and I think people are a lot bolder now, think it's like cool or something.

Surprisingly the two main sects of Islam had slightly different opinions; Sunni Islam heavily discouraged the practice including the use of fingers and toys to penetrate the anus, calling it forbidden. On the other hand, two scholars I had come across of the Shia sect have said it is permissible as long as the wife consents to it. The basis for this being that man and wife are permitted to derive all kinds of sexual pleasures from one another.. Seems legit. With that being said, the majority of Shia scholars actually forbid the act so there is only a small minority, which would deem it permissible. My advice, make sure your following the right sheikh.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Identifying and making choices

By finding new ways to speak and write about sex and love, young British Muslims are negotiating pressures from within their families and communities, and confounding some of the wider society's unsympathetic – sometimes racist – stereotypes about them.



Image: screen shot from documentary from this project: [Women making choices](#).

Key Findings

- For young British Muslims, it is hard to talk about sex and love.
- But young women and men are breaking these silences and finding ways to speak.
- Most experience pressure to marry a person of the opposite sex while they are young.
- But some are finding ways to stay single for longer, as young adults.
- Young British Muslims are finding ways to negotiate the kinds of marriages they want.
- They are also experimenting with sex and exploring their sexualities.

Additional films and stories

- Sunah's short story about an unhappy marriage: [Wasting time](#)
- Another story about dating, this time in the form of a script: [Nasser and Haleema](#)
- A short story about living with the memory of a past love: How not to drown in the [past](#)
- A story about a complicated marriage, read by Mikey: [untitled](#)