



'In Conversation with Muslim Dads'

**Report from a series of regional workshops held
between May 2004 and July 2006**

**This research was part of an 18 month partnership between
An-Nisa Society and Fathers Direct**

Report compiled by Humera Khan

by Humera Khan

Executive Summary

1.0 Several key issues have arisen through this consultation with Muslim fathers. The first, and perhaps most powerful has been that Muslim men have a lot to say about their feelings and experiences of parenting/fatherhood. That Muslim fathers love their children and have a profound sense of responsibility towards them was demonstrably clear.

2.0 Countering their ability to be the fathers they want to be, was the feeling of being misrepresented and misunderstood. Consistently throughout all of the workshops was a strong sense of defensiveness by the fathers on how they were perceived and presented, in particular by the media.

2.1 The majority of Muslim fathers were keen to integrate but were cautious of what they described as the Islamophobic attitude of wider society to Islam and Muslims. This was seen as a major barrier to engaging more fully in society and feeling comfortable about letting their children participate in mainstream activities.

2.2 Fear about what appeared to be conflicting with their cultural and spiritual values often resulted in retracting from integrating and becoming more insular. What was encouraging from the feedback was that though fathers were defensive they were very open to engaging in dialogue to develop better understanding between 'other' cultures, faiths and perspectives. Muslim fathers wanted to be understood and not interpreted.

2.3 Muslim fathers were not accessing materials on fatherhood or services provided by the statutory sector for fathers or parenting. The irrelevance of local services to the needs of Muslim fathers was obvious. The only active search for information on fatherhood/parenting was through the internet on Islamic sites. Services providers need to review where they are failing to attract Muslim fathers to their services and to redress this.

3.0 The diversity of experiences of the Muslim fathers who participated in the workshops was very broad. There were subtle as well as obvious differences

between generations, different Muslim cultures, converts and the nature of migration patterns.

3.1 It was evident by the shift in Muslim population that we can no longer interpret the experiences of Muslim fathers as only being from the subcontinent. Other Muslim cultures are also a major part of British Muslim society as are the growing number of converts. Understanding all these experiences will contribute to a better understanding of Muslim fathering experiences as it was stressed in the workshops that while there were differences in backgrounds the reference point of shared faith was a common meeting ground.

4.0 There was an opening in discussion that as fathers they were struggling to come to terms with changing lifestyles patterns often resulting in a sense of loss and isolation.

4.1 Cultural and religious norms of fathers being the 'provider' and the 'authority' figure meant that the ability to financially support their families was of paramount concern to all the fathers. Terms such as 'provider' and 'authority' were used extensively in all the workshops – it was evident that this was the criteria for success for the fathers and nurturing of their children was not given the same priority. The impact of loss of employment and ability to engage effectively as fathers needs further research.

4.2 Consequently loss of 'respect' and 'authority' was a recurring theme as was the difficulty in communicating to children who increasingly had differing cultural norms. Support for Muslim fathers on how to re-negotiate fathering without loss of status and responsibility would require more in-depth work.

4.3 Despite uncertainty in the changing role of culture, traditions and religion all the fathers who participated in the workshops felt that faith played a major role in their re-evaluation of their lifestyles. Religion was clearly seen as a force for good both in their own personal development and that of their children's self-esteem and confidence. The role of religion is often seen negatively by mainstream service providers and needs to be addressed if they wish to make themselves relevant to Muslim fathers.

5.0 The lack of appropriate social outlets for youth and family centred activities was a theme through out all the workshops.

5.1 Youth services were seen as mono-cultural and not providing appropriate activities for their children and therefore they were not comfortable about sending their children. Muslim specific activities were seen as crucial to develop self-confidence as well as helping to heal fractured family relationships.

5.2 Intra-faith/cultural confidence was seen as an important pre-requisite to inter-community integration. There was a strong feeling of needing to feel confident in your own identity first in order to feel safe and confident with others. Much of the current work on social cohesion puts emphasis on integration without supporting communities/interest groups working through their own issues first. Broadening activities aimed at social cohesion to include intra-faith/cultural activity needs to be looked at.

6.0 Most of the conversations revolved around father/son relationships. Fathers being absent in their sons early years and adolescence was a recurring theme. First generation fathers were more inclined to see this as a norm while second generation fathers felt that this created a major vacuum in their lives.

6.1 Adolescent alienation and frustration was experienced by a large percentage of second generation fathers. There were various reactions to this. Some did not think about it and others saw it as normal. Several of the fathers had actively managed to work through these feelings and re-establish a positive and pro-active relationship with their fathers.

6.2 The opportunity to spend 'quality' time with their fathers in later life was cited as being the catalyst for significant change in the relationship. Through this process they had managed to re-evaluate and understand some of the difficulties their fathers faced and were able to work through their own feelings. Service providers need to consider facilitating opportunities for healing father/son relationships by creating 'quality time' activities.

6.3 Girls and their relationship with their fathers were not specifically gone into in any great depth. It was raised primarily as concern how to support daughters when they had very little experience of 'girls' and their specific issues. This area needs to be developed further.

6.4. The issue of supporting children with sexual health education came up indirectly on several occasions. When probed fathers felt completely ill-equipped to deal with this issue and a few admitted that it was either not provided at all or left to their wives. Developing and disseminating faith-sensitive sexual health resources needs to be provided to develop this work.

Recommendations

1. To do a mapping exercise on what activities are available for Muslim fathers
2. Produce and dissemination a toolkit on parenting for Muslim fathers that focuses both on mainstream and Islamic parenting/fathering issues
3. To investigate and research further the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim fathers and challenge negative stereotypes of Muslim men
4. Train more Muslim men as professional fatherhood workers
5. Training the statutory sector on Islam/Muslim men/fathers and how to work proactively from a faith-based perspective
6. Develop inter-generation work i.e. father/son, parents/children, father/daughters
7. Develop more Muslim/faith-friendly youth and family-oriented activities
8. Facilitate/funding more discussion/support groups for Muslim fathers
9. Provide information on how to access small project resources to support community centred fatherhood groups

Regional Muslim fatherhood workshops

Aim:

To develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of Muslim men/fathers

Objectives:

To re-evaluate the changing role of Muslim fatherhood

1. To discuss the relationship between religion and cultural practices
2. To consider the barriers and challenges facing Muslim men in their ability to be effective fathers
3. To identify some key actions that can be taken forward

Background

Regional workshops with Muslim fathers are the third part of an 18-month partnership between An-Nisa Society and Fathers Direct. Having already developed the work on Muslim fatherhood on the Fathers Direct website and the guide for professionals working with Muslim fathers the workshops took this discussion to another level.

It had been claimed that Muslim fathers were a 'hard to reach' group and reluctant to discuss issues such as parenting and fatherhood. This research is a pilot project to test this assumption and find out the experiences of Muslim fathers, their views and expectations.

Methodology

The work already done through this partnership played a positive role in building confidence with the fathers and their willingness to participate. Being able to direct fathers to the Fathers Direct website and distributing copies of articles produced in Q-News on Muslim fatherhood had a positive impact on the fathers and most were keen to do follow up after the session.

The reputation both of An-Nisa Society and Q-News gave legitimacy within the community and the assurance that they would be Muslim-centred and not just 'another council consultation that gets nowhere'.

Organising workshops

Working with Muslim fathers is an underdeveloped area of work which created challenges both within the Muslim community and the statutory sector.

Muslim organisations are on the whole badly resourced without the infrastructure or staff to support workshops or promote publicity. This meant that along with formal publicity, emphasis had to be put getting fathers through word-of-mouth. There were also difficulties in finding an appropriate time in which to run the sessions due to the various activities at the centres. Mosques revolved around prayer times and after school religious classes. This potential was harnessed at the Muslim Welfare House and at An-Nisa Society's

Supplementary Muslim School where workshops were organised at a time when fathers dropped their children for religion classes or the prayer time.

When working with the statutory sector it was easier to work with Muslim men already working with Muslim fathers. Though on reflection there may have been some benefit to have gone straight to the head office of organisations such as Sure Start and Barnardos and work within their system. This was not done for several reasons primarily because it would have been far more time consuming and would have given the workshops a more institutional flavour which we wanted to avoid. Another reason was that many statutory bodies had not initiated work with Muslim fathers and some were cautious about setting up projects for a single faith group. We did actually come across this perspective when negotiating setting up a workshop with one organisation who said their policy was to bring different communities together and not to segregate them, in particular on 'faith' lines. After some discussion this workshop was abandoned as a workshop which was not made up of Muslim fathers only would have defeated our objective.

Muslim men working in such organisations were tremendously supportive of the workshops and keen to take it forward. They saw the workshops as an opportunity to further develop their own work as well as influence their organisations to work with more cultural and religious sensitivity. The demand for extra support and resources for frontline workers was very high.

The client group for all the workshops varied significantly reflecting migration patterns, cultural and generational differences. Participant cultural backgrounds included Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Somali, Algerian, Moroccan, Kenyan, Nigerian, English, South African, Sri Lankan, and Yemeni.

Prepared set questions were used for all the workshops as a basic guide for the discussion but there was flexibility in how they were used. As the discussions were organic the questions were asked and answered with consideration to the dynamics of each group individually.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the workshops was the willingness of the fathers to contribute to the discussions and willingness to share their feelings and their vulnerability. Shyness in all the discussions was short lived and it was only the limitation of time that prevented the discussion from going into further depth. In all the workshops the fathers were keen to meet regularly and to pursue the discussions afterwards.

Key findings

Resources on fatherhood/parenting

Many of the fathers admitted that they did not tend to access mainstream information on fatherhood because they didn't know what was available and how to access it. Some felt that it wasn't something they had thought about accessing before but if it was available maybe they would. It was mentioned on several occasions that they felt alienated from many of the resources that were available. Reasons for this included that they didn't reflect their experiences, were not usually faith sensitive and tended to be geared towards mothers. When asked where they thought they should go to find such information most were not sure citing perhaps the bookshops.

There was a generational difference in the need to access and learn about parenting and fathering. Older generation fathers being more inclined to believe that this information was for their wives where younger generation more inclined to actively seek help. Of all the fathers participating in the workshops it was a few within the second generation who felt they needed to access this information to fill their knowledge gap and to actively improve their fathering skills. For the younger generation fathers the absence of other men to talk to in the community meant that many of them were turning to the internet for information, particularly the Islamic sites. When asked why they don't go and speak to someone face-to-face they responded by saying it was difficult to find someone who could answer their questions in a way that made sense to them. It was acknowledged that information from the internet is not necessarily straight forward and requires a certain amount of understanding of the different opinions within the Muslim context.

It was extremely important for most of the fathers who participated in the workshops to get more information on Islamic parenting in order to improve their own parenting. This information is very thin on the ground.

Islamophobia

A consistent theme throughout the workshops was the impact of the image of Islam generally and the image of Muslim men specifically. Most of the fathers, while affected by the growing Islamophobia in Britain were more concerned

about the effect of it on their children. Fathers were concerned that the only image of Islam is hostile and negative and were already aware of how their children struggled to come to terms with it. It was felt that these images go before them as Muslim men/fathers often making them defensive and reactionary.

The need for positive Muslim male/father role models was universally felt by the fathers. Amir Khan, Mohammed Ali, Malcolm X were seen as positive role models.

Educational

There was a two-tier discussion on education in most of the workshops. Education in the minds of the fathers immediately meant choices about where to send their children for their secular education as well as for their religious education. All the workshops were conducted in areas where there was a significant Muslim population resulting in discussions being more centred around 'good' or 'bad' schools rather than 'isolation'. The quality of education did concern many fathers as did cultural influences within the schools especially once the children reached high school.

While most of the fathers who participated in the workshops sent their children to state schools the discussion in several of the workshops centred on the negative impact of these schools and the 'terror' that Muslim children often felt within them. Many fathers felt that state schools were insensitive to Islam and Muslims and resulted in Muslim children becoming alienated and suffering from low self esteem.

A few fathers felt the only option was to send their children to a full-time Muslim school but others were more creative in reducing outside influences by turning to alternative education systems. This meant options such as Church schools, sending the children 'back home' for their education, home schooling and in one instance to a Steiner school.

Statutory bodies

Statutory bodies played a very limited role in the lives of the fathers and were usually viewed with negativity. In one workshop the first half an hour was spent

in countering questions from the fathers as to whether we were from the council and what did we want? The fathers said that they were tired of endless people coming and trying to talk to them about issues but doing nothing about it.

Generational

An interesting gap in perception determined by age developed consistently through the various workshops. Overall, the fathers who participated in the workshops were concerned about similar issues such as lack of information, fear of the 'other', concern about their children's education and maintaining religious and cultural identity. However, the emphasis differed from first generation fathers to second generation fathers.

First generation fathers lacked confidence in the British system as it was not something they had grown up with and therefore could not identify with. They also had a completely different experience of childhood and education. In most cases the first generation fathers had a more traditional and conservative upbringing where the father's authority was clear cut and gender roles segregated. Relationships with their fathers were distant but respectful. In some cases closeness developed later in life as they entered the world of men. As there were no women present we were not able to discuss the relationship between girls and their fathers.

Second generation fathers had similar cultural experiences but with an important difference. The process of migration had removed families from their traditional extended family and community context. While first generation fathers worked long hours to provide for their families, the second generation were often left to fend for themselves and deal with the outside world alone without support networks or help from people who could understand their experiences. There wasn't a smooth transition from the boyhood to manhood as the world of the man had been left behind in the country of origin. Most of the second generation fathers had gone through a variety of complex and often conflicting experiences in order to come to terms with their relationships with their fathers and their own identity.

An interesting theme that emerged was the feelings of alienation and anger of second generation fathers during their adolescence. This anger was in some cases undirected but at some point it was directed significantly towards their fathers. Several of the fathers said that their relationship with their fathers changed when there had been an opportunity to spend 'quality' time with them. This 'opportunity' became available either because the father was getting older, by travelling together, when the father had become ill and required looking after or by working together. The effects of this interaction meant that the second generation fathers had the chance to look at their fathers differently and to appreciate their struggles and difficulties. Most of the second generation fathers felt that the ability to bond with their fathers was a crucial turning point in their lives and provided the ability to have closure on much of their unresolved frustrations of earlier life.

Of all the second generation fathers, there was only one who had a positive fathering experience. This relationship was described as being very 'hands on' where the father had good communication skills, would take the children out for regular trips and was able to be supportive through the various stages of growing up. This father said that he uses his father's example in his own fathering experience.

Converts

There were two convert fathers overall in the workshops with differing experiences. These fathers were able to share some the experiences of the others but had some specific issues of their own. The issue of 'authority' and the father being 'head of household' was in the main a common cultural experience. One father was from a single parent family where the father abandoned the mother before he was born. This experience greatly shaped his own fathering experience making him want to be much more hands on. In this context the need for spiritual centeredness was a key motivator as his 'missing link'. This was found through Islam.

The primary issues that were raised for convert Muslim fathers were how to integrate the positive aspects of their own upbringing with that of their adopted faith. One of the main challenges being how to remain culturally

English/Western but religiously Muslim and the impact of how their children would be viewed by others. It was argued that many Muslim convert fathers felt a pressure to conform to a Muslim 'cultural norm' and let go of their own heritage. A key factor in this was that Islam in mainstream society is seen as an 'Asian' religion and that being English, Western and Muslim is not seen as being normal.

The challenge of convert Muslim fathers is an extremely underdeveloped area of work and discussion resulting in them becoming isolated and misunderstood.

Work patterns

The work patterns of the fathers who participated and that of their own fathers were a recurring theme in the workshops. This experience was different for first and second generation fathers. First generation fathers tended to be away at work for very long hours. Whilst second generation fathers were also away for long hours they were more inclined to make efforts to spend time with their children. The experience of having an absent father was an issue that affected many of the second generation fathers as they had to come to terms with a father they didn't really know. Most seemed to have come to terms with this and had become very reflective and sympathetic to their own fathers. Most of the second generation fathers were at an age, where they could empathise with their fathers. Several of the fathers shared that this process had come about through a lot of soul searching and after years of inner conflict and tension with their fathers.

Unemployment was not an issue that came up in the workshops and was not specifically asked as a question.

Parenting styles

There were many different fathering styles being followed by the fathers. It was said on several occasions that they felt that fatherhood was something instinctive – that you are fathers first as it is something universal. In one workshop it was said and agreed by the whole group, that they were 'fathers first and being Muslim gave 'added value'.

The feelings described by the fathers in the main referred to their emotional feelings of being fathers and their relationship with their children. This didn't mean that they necessarily felt equipped with the required parenting skills. In fact it was said on several occasions that mothers are better in the earlier years and fathers are better once the children are able to communicate.

It was obvious by the feedback that fathers were doing the best they could in what were often isolated and complex situations.

Spiritual values

A common theme through all the workshops was the importance of imparting religious knowledge to their children. This knowledge was in the main strongly connected to 'identity'. The feeling being that the greater the information or experience of religion the more secure their children would feel in who they are. As a result they would be better human beings and better citizens. Equally many fathers felt the limitations of their own Islamic knowledge as something that concerned them greatly. This lack of knowledge and in some cases the inability to explain religion to their children in a language style they could understand, varied depending on the background of the fathers.

Cultural values

The difference between cultural and religious values also impacted on the lives of the fathers. In one workshop there was a very lively discussion between fathers brought up in the Muslim world and those fathers brought up here. First generation fathers expressed difficulty in adjusting to the attitude to family life here. This was a recurring theme as the issue of 'male' or 'fathers' authority was felt to be continuously undermined in Western society. It was felt that 'back home' these things didn't need to be explained and the father had an elevated role and was respected by his children as the head of house and authority figure.

On the other hand, second generation and convert Muslim fathers though often brought up with the same cultural values as first generation fathers, were also significantly influenced by Western perspectives on fatherhood. These fathers

lacked the cultural and spiritual confidence of first generation fathers and tended to actively seek how to redress this.

In one workshop where all the fathers were second generation, the theme of the 'burden of eldest son' created an interesting focus of discussion. Clarity for what this meant was asked for by the convert father who couldn't understand the concept as it was totally alien to him. As several of the fathers present were the 'eldest son' we were able to pursue this theme. The particular role of the eldest son was explained as being cultural (there was uncertainty as to whether this was religious). Traditionally the eldest son acts as a proxy to the father and is expected to take over the role of head of house when the father is absent or after he has passed away. This is translated as the eldest son being responsible for the welfare of his mother and younger siblings and in some cases their extended family – this could mean financially, overseeing education and employment, facilitating marriages and general decision making. The requirements of this role were taken very seriously though many of the fathers found it a heavy burden as circumstances in their lives did not always make it easy to fulfil this function effectively.

The ability to negotiate 'cultural' and 'religious' roles in a 'secular Western' society was felt to make life very difficult as most fathers felt ill-equipped in all three arenas. This is where fathers felt particularly vulnerable. Many articulated their feeling of disempowerment where British society gives 'rights to the children and not to the parents'. Negotiating this transition was considered by some to be very traumatic and often unsuccessful. In one workshop a father said that all three of his children 'had become influenced by Western culture' and had left home after much conflict. It was usually the younger generation fathers who felt that while straddling the demands of religion, culture and secular society was not easy, it was not all bad and there was much to learn from mainstream society about attitudes to parenting and fathering.

Positive social opportunities for children

Practically all the fathers who participated in the workshops felt extremely concerned about the lack of 'appropriate' or 'constructive alternative' social outlets for their children. A common frustration that came up was the struggle to

keep their children away from negative outside influences such as television and popular culture. It was felt that peer pressure and youth culture was a powerful force which they were not able to compete with. There was overall negativity to the youth activities available as it was felt that they were not culturally or religiously sensitive. Activities for very small children were not seen in such a negative manner as those for children over the age of 11. The lack of social outlets was cited as a cause of frustration in young Muslims. Girls were particularly affected as there was still some flexibility for young Muslim boys but very little for Muslim girls.

All the fathers felt that it was important for their children to interact with children from other cultures and faiths. It was felt that in order to do this without feeling insecure and vulnerable Muslim children needed activities where they could first engage with each other to build up their self esteem.

Communication with mainstream culture

While some fathers felt very negative about the way British society treated them as Muslim men/fathers they nevertheless believed in living together and that social cohesion was essential. In several of the workshops ignorance and mistrust of 'the other' by both sides was acknowledged. Many of the fathers expressed the importance of their wish to be understood for what they are – that they have feelings and opinions that are also valid. Dialogue and the need for advocacy in taking this forward were cited as ways forward.

'How can we communicate with those on the 'other side'?

'We need advocates to help communication processes'.

Gender

Gender was not an area of discussion that was focussed on. We did not go into the types of marriages or relationships the fathers had with their wives. This issue did come out informally through what fathers described as their fathering roles and by so doing described what they felt the role of the mother should be. In one workshop it was obvious that there were differences in approach to parenting of the father and the mother.

Mothers/Wives

Apart from the workshop at the An-Nisa Society's Supplementary Muslim School there was no contact with mothers. The response from mothers at this workshop was very interesting. While extremely keen for their husbands to participate in the workshops there was also a certain amount of feeling left unexpressed. Prior to the workshop many of the mothers made lots of suggestions about what the fathers should think and talk about in the session but it was explained to them that the workshop would be led by the fathers themselves. In the workshop itself the fathers themselves did suggest that as well as being important to meet as fathers only it was also necessary to meet and discuss issues with their wives. Suggestions were made for further meetings and possible family orientated outings.

London Meeting 1

Organisation: An-Nisa Society's Supplementary Muslim School, Park Lane, Wembley, Middlesex

Date: Sunday 22 May 2005

Participants:

Fourteen fathers participated in the workshop and reflected diverse Muslim culture including Pakistani, Sri Lankan, South African, Nigerian, English, Arab. This diversity broadly represented the diversity of the population as a whole in the London Borough of Brent. One father was a convert. Most fathers were not born in the United Kingdom and spent their early years growing up in a Muslim country.

Venue:

The workshop was held with An-Nisa Society's Supplementary Muslim School (SMS) at Park Lane School, Wembley. The SMS was first set up in 1986 and has an established relationship with the families that attend the school. Fathers already play an important role in supporting the everyday running of the school.

Publicity:

Publicity had been distributed several times through the SMS newsletter. It was also sent out via the Internet to various local organisations and individuals though it was not really expected that we would get too many participants this way. There were also many conversations with fathers prior to the workshop encouraging their participation.

Initial response was cautious but supportive, as fathers were not clear what was going to happen. A few fathers showed commitment to the event straight away while others needed persuading.

Framework for the session:

The light breakfast refreshments were welcome and fathers felt comfortable and relaxed. After a brief explanation of the project the fathers were left to run the workshop by themselves. A chair and minute taker were appointed.

Fathers felt there was not enough time to really get into the subject and they only really skimmed the surface. They felt that the questions were too leading and re-interpreted them for themselves. As the workshop got on the way, fathers wanted to continue their discussions and the workshop eventually ended at 1.25pm, at the end of the SMS day.

Mothers' response:

Mothers were extremely pleased that the workshop was taking place and many expressed the wish to have also been part of the discussion. Some wished they could have the opportunity within the workshop to get across their views. Others wanted to have a similar opportunity for themselves where they could be 'spoilt' with the refreshments!

Children's response:

The children of the fathers who attended the workshop were overjoyed to see their fathers at the school. Many kept peeping into the room where the workshop was taking place and taking the opportunity to 'show off' their dads.

Questions

Original questions were amended according to what was appropriate for the workshop.

What kind of a father do you consider yourself to be?

- Fathers felt vulnerable on the issue of 'fatherhood'
- The opportunity to share this vulnerability was very welcome and many fathers felt that it was important to be together to begin this discussion
- It was recognised that those present did not really 'know' each other outside of a passing greeting and felt the breaking down of barriers was essential
- It was felt that there was a wealth of experience around table
- Islamic perspective of all/any issue

- It was felt that the overall role of Muslim fatherhood was no different from other fathers i.e. bread winner – provide support
- It was unanimously agreed that fathers are fathers first – all fathers need to understand basics – being Muslim is an extra – ‘added value’
- It was felt that Muslim fathers have same expectations as other fathers and positive/constructive engagement with non-Muslim fathers would be good as long as it doesn’t infringe on Muslim religious sensitivity
- Muslim cultural differences reflect on fatherhood style adopted
- It was unanimously felt that working as a team would be beneficial
- Fathers also felt that being a ‘father’ was a daunting task as there were too many stereotypes of ‘our young teenagers out there’
- Most fathers were concerned about their children struggling with growing up as Muslims e.g. many parents try to limit their child watching television or other activities that their peer group may have no restriction on. Fathers concerned about keeping a balance in the home and some sanity – but felt there were no constructive alternatives
- There is often no point of common reference between fathers and their children

What do you consider to be your family’s expectations of you?

- Wife expectation – bread winner first
- Children expectation – head of family – by example

What difficulties do you face as Muslim fathers?

- Need more Islamic education – not learn parrot fashion
- Increase understanding of Quran
- Provide more materials/resources
- Make children proud of being Muslim
- Add value as Muslims

What do you think makes fathering difficult?

- Trying to maintain an upright personal example
- Lack of role models
- Peer pressure
- Media pressure

- You need to live good upright lives e.g. Behave with integrity and honesty – be good role models – but we don't always practice what we preach!
- No point in just reflecting on Islamic past glory – have to address today's society
- Need for 'generic' fatherhood information
- To 'add value' as a Muslim father requires a phenomenal amount of extra work
- Lack of holistic view on parenting/fatherhood
- Muslims have to be proactive
- Need good reference point
- Things not just black and white

Where do you get information on being a Muslim father?

- Don't go to mainstream information because tends not to be faith sensitive
- Need a tool kit
- Power of prayer

What makes a good father?

- Being good human beings
- Compassion
- Kindness
- To be good Muslim need to be good human being – need to be a good human being – will make you a good Muslim
- Islamic values

The way forward

- More discussions – lunch/dinner get together, possibly with wives
- Sharing fears, hopes, expectations
- Invite speaker

Quotes from fathers:

'No other father has clear prophet examples on how to bring up children as Muslims'

'As an individual the task of fatherhood is impossible'

'Parenthood is a shared responsibility'

'Circumstances have changed – we have to adjust'

'Feel doubly vulnerable as Muslims'

'Islam helps me to work out how to be a good father'

'What has come across for me is cry for help'

'I have a friend who is not a Muslim – we have different reference points but we have more in common as a father'

'How do we deal with our fears?'

London Meeting 2

Organisation: Muslim Welfare House Trust, Seven Sisters Road, Finsbury Park, London

Date: Monday 12 December 2005

Contact: Halima Chergui and Khalid Oumar

Participants:

There were a total of 12 participants. Not all fathers stayed throughout the workshop. 10 fathers left their names or contact details. The group was made up primarily of men from a North African or Somali background.

Venue:

The Muslim Welfare House, founded in 1970. The multi-purpose building acts as more than just a mosque, but as an entire community centre - it acts as a social, cultural, learning and advice centre for more than 15 nationalities, ranging from Algerians and Somalis, to Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

The MWH site consists of offices, two training centres, a youth centre, Library and prayer rooms for both men and women. They provide a variety of services including: one to one support and counselling, Business and Employment Support program, quality training and “upskilling”, progression routes to those who cannot enter full time education.

Do you think it is easy being a Muslim father in Britain? What to you consider being some of the difficulties?

- No, it's very difficult
- Environment/society not helping – living in un-Islamic environment not easy
- Attitude of children is such that they consider things that are shameful not to be shameful
- Children don't listen
- Authority of parents not there
- Children diverted from respecting their parents

- System says you can't smack – there's freedom for children but not for parents
- Children are influenced by non-Muslim society to do things like smoking
- Children think Islam is inferior – only see what is in front – don't look behind

Do you feel supported or understood in the issues that concern you as a Muslim father?

- Two kinds of problems 1) men and women looking for Islamic way of life and 2) problems at school
- Parents love their children – authorities think that they don't care – then immediately social services gets involved

“Don't think that schools teach our children to disobey us – but you can't expect teachers to understand our cultures and way of life”

- There are lots of cultural and language barriers
- Children want to integrate in school
- Home not a place to find their identity – they see it as oppressive
- Parents don't know how to respond
- Not about religion – but about context – how do you communicate with those on the 'other side' – how do you communicate your different values and norms
- Double life not a life – two environments
- Home life and outside life is different
- Pressure from pop culture
- No communication between mainstream society to explain cultural context

How do you see yourself as a Muslim father?

- As a father, role is to teach rights and role of individual, parents and society
- No resources for projects that are 'faith-based' – shared framework
- We are fathers – we are community – we are society
- Image – inside – strict, wife beaters

- After 9/11 impact on perception of Muslims – even children called ‘Bin Laden’
- Muslim men feel undermined – All parents want respect from children but how can you compete with Nike, McDonald’s and Reeboks

What do you think about Muslim fathers who are absent from fathering?

- Absent fathers is a reality. Often mothers don’t know a lot of English.
- Mothers role changes as children grow up – fathers become more important in teens
- There is also a changing relationship between husbands and wives – not the same as back home where things all worked in a particular way
- Even if you do your best it is difficult to bring up children here
- Problem of Khat especially amongst Somali community – it effects family relationships – it should be banned

What do you hope for the future?

- Would like to bring Western and Islamic cultures together to learn about each other
- Muslims are not treated justly here – they are seen as parasites not as a human being
- What people need to know is that Muslims also have qualities and Muslims need to appreciate the qualities of others
- Need to break barriers within the council
- Need to challenge the stereotypes of Muslim men and Muslim fathers
- Fathers need a place to turn to where they can get advice and counselling
- In countries of origin they wouldn’t ask for help as this would be considered a sign of weakness – in this country help is needed
- Set up organisation of Muslim fathers
- Muslim male professionals need to support elders – provide advice
- Mosque should play a role in providing support services
- Need role models such as Amir Khan and Danny Williams

Birmingham Meeting

Organisation: None

Date: 23 March 2006

Contact: Musab Bora

Participants: Total of 8 fathers though 6 stayed throughout. This workshop was not done through an organisation. Having tried to connect to a couple of organisations it proved easier to gather an eclectic group of fathers through a contact living in Birmingham. The fathers were predominantly of second generation Pakistani origin. There was also an English convert and two fathers who were of Yemeni and Singaporean origin.

Venue: In home of one of participants

Publicity: Through word of mouth.

Framework for the workshop:

The workshop was held in the home of the contact in Birmingham over dinner. Because of the make-up of the group the first question asked was on their relationship with their own fathers. This led to a very in-depth and meaningful conversation about father-son relationships. Fathers felt able to share very personal feelings in a very thoughtful manner. Being a group made up of second generation Muslim men made a difference to the way they articulated their experiences and the issues they focused on. Time limitations again prevented the discussion from going further. Feedback the following day from the fathers was very positive and several of the fathers have decided to continue the conversations amongst themselves.

There was a general discussion about the Muslim population in Birmingham

- Mainly Mirpuri (Bradri system) and Yemeni
- General Pakistani

- Somali
- Mixed Muslim background

There are several large mosques or organisations but a limited number of voluntary sector organisations.

Describe your relationship with your own father. How different is it to that with your own children?

A lot of time was spent on this question as some of the father shared their experiences.

Father 1

- Father died year ago – retrospectively parents brought up well but went through difficult adolescence – had bad relationship with father and would often not speak – lots of resentments
- Dad violent physically and emotionally – went to university but found resentment increased – things changed when father became ill – suddenly father became ‘dependant’ therefore had to confront relationship
- Not religious at this point but had to go through process where had to confront self
- Last three years of dad's life things changed
- Went to Mecca (for Ummrah, pilgrimage) - first time had time for father/son bonding – realised for the first time that father never stopped loving me
- In the end problem wasn't dad but myself
- Father brought up on concept of ‘roof’ and ‘roti’ (bread)

‘For men the relationship with your dad is crucial to your ability to be a man’

Father 2

- Not born Muslim. Mother unmarried teenager in 1960's
- Father never there – didn't/never knew anything about him
- Would be left with grandparents
- Grew up with a lot of social deprivation

- Blasé about dad not being around until about the age of 20 when it became an obsession
- Constant feeling for about 10 years that - felt something missing – wanted to know him – went looking for him
- At the age of 9 had a certainty about God - started to explore faith at this time
- Faith filled the void and Islam helped put things into perspective – contextualised purpose of existence
- To compensate own deprivation of a father – became evangelical father myself

Father 3

- Experienced intense love from father
- Family of 12 kids and father gave special time to all kids – he had a youth work background
- Early years were around mother – aware when to engage with father
- Father very active – took to lots of places
- Good communicator – even with the girls
- What learnt from father – to be affectionate, understanding, aware of different needs of children, not to be over powering, pro-active BUT also firm and authoritative
- Father still big influence on life today

Father 4

- Eldest son – father worked long hours therefore not around much
- Strict upbringing - physical – beatings
- As eldest accepted had to take extra responsibilities
- Not close to father
- Things changed in secondary school – wanted things like other kids but didn't get – but didn't blame father
- Father uneducated in this country
- Established family norm – occasionally social norms
- Became angry as an adolescent – maybe hormonal
- Would sometimes take out on people
- Going to university was liberating

- Relationship with father improved as opportunity for bonding increased

Father 5

- Father pivotal in life now but was frightened of him in you
- Dad was the 'punishment' threat by mother 'wait till your dad comes home'
- Dad worked long hours – 18 hours a day
- Used to stay away from him
- Became reserved
- Secondary school – became rebellious – parties etc
- From reserved to pent up anger – because father figure not there
- Felt contradiction – was happy but angry
- 15 went to national service (Singapore)
- After left school joined dad in his shop
- Relationship changed from being scared to friend

'Need grounding your father provides for you – he is the connection to the past – to who you are.'

Father 6

- Eldest son – alien concept – have representative role
- Burden of being eldest son
- Different cultural expectations of eldest son
- Difficult to be in Muslim cultural context – not something aspires to but don't feel have to reject

What kind of a father do you consider yourself to be?

- Becoming father most important thing to me
- No matter how much you think about it you are never prepared
- Need classes at school
- New dad: trying to be different from own dad
- Don't go to dad's example – try to improve – go to Islam
- Because of positive dad experience feel equipped to be best dad
- Convert: Because of background 'really' wanted it to work. Was stay at home dad – what do you do with children until they can talk?!!

- Made conscientious decision not to be part of nurturing process until children were aged between 4 or 5
- Despite not feeling well equipped instinct kicks in
- Breast feeding can make fathers feel excluded but not much you can do about it though
- Fathers have a sort of authority – maybe because they have deeper voices
- Parents have different skills
- Second generation talk more about their own feelings
- First generation more concerned about honour, image, machismo
- Fathers become softer as they become older – sometimes due to illness – can create an emotional reaction
- Sacrifice of first generation fathers give second generation more opportunities
- Second generation are making different choices

How do you find balancing your children's religious, cultural and secular education?

- Not bringing up kids 'forcefully' Muslim
- Not forcing – bringing up morally and ethically difficult – where do you go for support - difficult to find balance

Is it easy to ask for help as a Muslim father?

- For Islamic help to first to internet
- Sometimes go to sister
- There is no one to go to for face to face advice – no counsellors etc
- Wouldn't go to a religious leader for this information – only go to mosque to pray
- Problem with internet: opinions are too diverse
- Greatest fear as a Muslim parent:
- Non-Muslim society – corrupting the children
- Live life as Allah intended – active journey
- Not being able to set good example
- Kids more influenced by outside
- Worried about social problems – drugs etc

'Greatest happiness is waking up and seeing baby daughters face'

- Worry about education – schools appalling – Muslims schools too expensive and not necessarily the best option
- Stable family life – its not always like that but you have to evolve

What do you need?

- Scholars addressing real issues on family and social matters
- More understanding of Muslim social context
- More understanding of the society in which we live
- Advice in context
- Would like dads to be heard
- Society to become better

Huddersfield Meeting

Organisation: Barnardos, KKDB, Battye St, Heckomndwike, WF16 9ES

Contact: Wahid Hussain

Date: February 2005

Participants: 16 Muslim fathers

Venue: Barnardos, KKDB, Battye St, Heckomndwike, WF16 9ES

Publicity: Posters in local community centres and shops

Framework for the day: Part of Dewsbury, Heckmondwike, Batley meeting with Muslim community. The feedback is different from other the meetings as it was locally led.

General Feedback

We are working fathers, working 12-15 hours shifts always thinking about what is best for our children, giving the best to our kids, providing things we never had. Due to the fact of working long hours we are often not there for our kids (morally) and not being involved in education etc.

Parents not taking interest in the children due to the fact of not having time. Look at the outcomes of how Muslim Pakistanis that were not involved in their children education how their children came out with no education where as the Hindus and Sikhs did concentrate on their children's education and they children came out with better education. Now we have seen the difference of getting involved in your child education and support can make a big difference and it has made us realise how important it is after seeing the out comes but it is to late for us but we cannot let it happen to our next generation, which it is happening.

It is very difficult being a Muslim father, cultural clash between children at home from what they are taught in school and colleges. Secular organisations need to be more aware of the Muslims needs and respect our beliefs.

The government should be doing more to make schools and companies understand the different beliefs of individuals and how schools and should work with their community's and try to understand the cultural and religious values of the children that attend their schools so this will make it easier for us.

There was a lot more love and warmth in traditional up-bringing and where us now in England the way this cultural is people and children are just saying me it's a selfish culture don't care about any one anymore.

There are pros and cons on what relationship we had with our fathers and what we got with our children depending on the job role and duty, dependant on life experience and life opportunities, we have more flexibility on how we work where as our father had to work 14hours a day in factory's but of their qualifications and being unskilled. So they couldn't spend more time with us they had to earn money to provide for their families in the country's they came from and look after their family's here. And we have time to go to parents evening and we have better understanding of how everything works because we have experience and life has given us better opportunities so we give more time to our family's.

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