

## The 21<sup>st</sup> century barriers to marital union among Muslim health workers: the Islamic panacea

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### Abstract

**Background:** Marriage is a desirable value for men and women. Despite the high value attached to marriage, majority of people in the health workforce and beyond, are still not in the marital union. What could be responsible for the multiple pragmatic solutions in bridging the deepening and widening marriage deterrent gap among Muslim healthcare providers. Hence, the current review assessed likely barriers contributing to low marital union among Muslims working in the health care industries.

**Methods/Result:** The authors' review set out to achieve the following objectives by asking the following questions: What is the Islamic understanding of marriage? What are the barriers to marital union among Muslim healthcare providers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What are the Islamic panacea to these barriers?

**Conclusion:** The reviewers concluded that the poor marriage rate among Muslims in the health sector in Nigeria can be traced to barriers from economic, social, legal, political and unIslamic factors. The review also suggested that going back to the basis which will reshape our attitude, belief and life purpose to that which makes us the best generation for both here and hereafter.

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### Introduction:

It is a desirable value for men and women of marriageable age to form a marital union. Despite the high value attached to marriage, majority of people in the health workforce and beyond, are still not in the marital union. This becomes even more worrisome, considering that the Muslim health care providers are also largely affected. Hence, the current review assessed likely barriers contributing to low marital union among Muslims working in the health care industries.

To accomplish the main objective of this review, the authors set out to achieve the following objectives by asking the following questions: What is the Islamic understanding of marriage? What are the barriers to marital union among Muslim healthcare providers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What is the Islamic panacea to these barriers?

### Understanding Marriage in Islam

Islam as a complete way of life, considers marital union as one of the most virtuous and legally approved social institutions for humankind. Marriage is, therefore,

comprehensively expressed Islamically by the term “Nikāḥ”, an Arabic word literally implying, “to collect and bind together.”<sup>1-4</sup> By definition, Nikah or Islamic marriage in the shari’ah is referred to as the legal and social contract which permits legal sexual relationship between two individuals of opposite sex, a man and a woman. In addition, Islamic marriage is not only a social obligation, but also an act of worship which is greatly admired by Allah (SWT). In other words, Islamic marriage is the commonest social role that also double as worship of which majority of the Ummah will be active players. It is thereby worrisome to notice the current low rate of marital union among Muslim healthcare providers who, by implication, are expected not to invoke economic reason as a major barrier.

### **Barriers to Marriage among Muslim Health Workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

#### The Economic Challenge

While most health workers are not living below the poverty line in Nigeria, a major economic reason that often stands as a major barrier to marriage is the projected “health-career-lifestyle standards for marriage.” This is similar to the “white picket fence”<sup>5</sup> phenomenon, which in our context is descriptive of upper middle class Nigerian wedding characterised by two or more of the

following: the groom or couple owing a fully well-furnished flat; currently riding at least a luxurious car; having a fat bank balance; and, making available a set-aside fund for a high budget societal wedding. Such high-cost wedding trap has been a big barrier to modest and affordable wedding that is within the reach of most health workers. The “big wedding” deterrent gap is widened by both gender who are to go into the marital union contract, their families, the wedding spiritual officiators, and the prying eyes of the community.

#### Normalizing Prohibited Marriages in Islam

The encompassing nature of marriage in Islam, does not recognise some forms of marital unions. Such prohibited marital union which are now being normalised in the community, also form another major barrier to Islamic marriage among Muslim health workers. Allah (SWT) in the Glorious Quran says: “Prohibited to you [for marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father's sisters, your mother's sisters, your brother's daughters, your sister's daughters, your [milk] mothers who nursed you, your sisters through nursing, your wives' mothers, and your stepdaughters under your guardianship [born] of your wives unto whom you have gone in. But if you have not gone in unto them, there is no sin upon you.

And [also prohibited are] the wives of your sons who are from your [own] loins, and that you take [in marriage] two sisters simultaneously, except for what has already occurred. Indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful.”<sup>6</sup>

Other categories of prohibited marital unions in Islam include all the following and more:

- Nikāḥ Ijtimaa: A marriage in which multiple men would have intercourse with a woman, and if she bore a child, she would choose one of the men to be the father of the child. This jahiliyya practice predates Islam and is now seen in both the Islamic and non-Islamic societies.
- Nikāḥ Mut’ah: A marriage that is temporary in nature. It has the condition of a definite time/period and a separation date prior to a marriage contract.
- Nikah Halala: Couples who only get to realise after divorce that the better life they fantasised in others before filing for a divorce is missing; thus, they thereafter found their ex-spouse more desirable than their present partner. They, therefore, arrange a planned marriage that allows a divorced woman to marry her previous husband after three separate divorce counts. This is Nikah Halala. This type of marital union is prohibited in Islam.
- Nikah Istibdaa: A marriage in which a husband would send his wife to another person, usually of noble lineage, to have intercourse with him. This was eradicated by Islam.
- Nikāḥ Shighār: is a marriage in which two men would exchange their daughters, sisters or other close women for marriage without paying mahr. It was prohibited by Prophet Muhammad (SAW).
- Prohibition due to species similarity. i.e. same sex marriages.
- Marriage between human and animal. Such marriage has the potential to normalise bestiality.
- Prohibition due to blood relations (Muharamaat). The Nikaah cannot be made with any of the Mahaarim. Confusion in genealogy and lineage and contradicting one of the tenets of Islamic laws; the concept of Hifz An-Nasab (Preservation of lineage).
- Prohibition due to religious difference. This is specific to Muslim women who have been forbidden from marrying non-Muslims. Hifz Ad-deen (Preservation of religion).

- Prohibition due to an irrevocable divorce.

### Growing Alternatives to Marriage

Under this sub-heading are group of marital-like relationship prohibited by Islam but are existing within contemporary Muslim communities. This living arrangement is “legal” in some western society, and through silent approval in the Muslim community. Among the Muslim Health care providers, they are not widely practised, but their traces are anecdotally palpable. The most common of such alternatives is co-habitation. Co-habitation is where couples, not legally contracted to live together as husband and wife, but are doing so. Another form of such alternatives is the “civil partnership”, where the signing of civil partnership schedule grants such individuals the legal status of marriage. It is one of the options that same-sex cohabiters uses to formalize same-sex marital union by living together and subsequently claiming legal rights, such as, inheritance. Despite the existence of these two alternatives to marriage, both are not recognized in Islam and in the Nigerian Family.<sup>7</sup>

### **Islamic Panacea to Identified Barriers**

Muslims working in the health industries aspire to marital union, but for the identified barriers. To bridge the marital union deterrent

gap and ease marriage-promotion plans of IMAN, the healthcare workers need not to only recognise the barriers but also change their attitudes and beliefs about marriage as guided by Islamic shari’ah. And to start applying the Islamic panacea to the marriage deterrent gap, it is pertinent to start by answering the question: “Why do we need to marry?”

### Why do we Need to Marry?

Marriage is necessary to fulfil the commandment of Allah SWT. Hence, Allah SWT says in the Glorious Qur’an:

“And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect.”<sup>8</sup>

“And we sent Messengers before you, and appointed for them wives and children...”<sup>9</sup>

“And marry those among you who are single (i.e. a man who has no wife and a woman who has no

husband) and also marry salihun (pious, fit and capable ones) of your male and female slaves; and if they are poor, Allah will enrich them out of His bounty. And Allah is All-sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-knowing.”<sup>10</sup>

The best of mankind further elaborated on the instructions and guidance of Allah SWT for us on marriage through his hadiths. One of such hadiths is:

On the authority of Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud (RA) who said The Prophet (SAW) said to us: “O youth, those of you who can support a wife should marry because this will be a means of keeping your gazes lowered and a protection from your private parts. And those amongst you who are not capable of should fast, for fasting will lower one's passion.”<sup>11</sup>

#### Components of an Islamic Nikaah

With the brief answer to why we need to marry, the next flow is to understand the Islamic necessity/requirement; “Whose presence and fulfilment legalizes the marriage?” These are: the Wali (i.e. representative of the bride); the declaration and acceptance; presence of two witnesses (who are mature, responsible and sane

Muslims); the giving and taking of Mahr (i.e. dowry); and the consent of the girl verbally is a must if she attain the age of maturity or in writing through her parents/representatives. Once the components of what validates a marriage is understood and internalised, then one should take the next steps. Steps in Choosing a Partner

The intending Muslim planning towards marriage should also note the following steps and sincerely navigate them:

- Equipping and arming oneself with qualities of the right spouse;
- Identifying those with the desired qualities;
- Istikhara (seeking Allah's guidance in choosing the best);
- Consultations and exploration of the desired partner;
- Seeking for permission from parents or guidance to start the process;
- Reciprocal consultations and exploration of the intended partner;
- Prospective partners can be permitted to see each other and start dating towards marriage;
- Bring all the ingredients of love and planning of all process of marriage;
- Continuous prayers throughout the process.

Guidelines for Choosing a Female Partner

“Women are married for four qualities. Some are married for wealth, some for family (lineage) status, some for beauty and some for the Deen (i.e. piety). Marry a woman for her Deen and you shall be happy/successful.”<sup>11</sup>

Abdullah bn Amr reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: “The whole world is a provision, and the best object of benefit of the world is the pious woman.”<sup>11</sup> Narrated Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud who said: The messenger of Allah use to command us to marry and prohibit us from celibacy in strong terms. He says “Marry the loving and fertile, for I will compete with the other Prophets with the number of my followers on the Day of Qiyama”.<sup>11</sup>

Guidelines for Choosing a Male Partner

Abu Huraira (RA) reported Allah's Messenger as saying, “When someone with whose religion and character you are satisfied asks for your daughter's hand in marriage, accede to his request. If you do not do so there will be temptation in the earth and extensive corruption.”<sup>11</sup>

**Overall Guidance to Overcoming Barriers to Marriage**

It is pertinent for Muslim healthcare providers to appreciate the meaning and purpose of marriage in Islam. For with such understanding, the barriers to getting married will be easily overcome and one can get married for the sake of Allah. Another angle is for IMAN and other policy operators to carry out more marriage-promotion without downplaying the role these barriers play in deterring Muslims in the health industries from getting married. A hidden factor that might be a barrier to getting married is the fear of divorce, and lately divorce appears to be high within the Muslim communities. The mammoth marriage solemnization carried out by the Government in Kano is a glimpse of the high divorce rate in Muslim communities. It is paramount for Muslim healthcare providers and Muslims, who are not in the health sector, as well as all well-meaning Nigerians to rise against the normalization of prohibited marriages in Islam and the promotion of alternatives to marriage that kept eroding the family fabrics of generational supports, growth, warmth and development.

**Limitations of the Review**

The review did not take into consideration the eroding marital specialisation of female

health workers where they are now breadwinners in addition to be likely homemakers – the trouble that comes with the superwoman syndrome. Other issues not addressed in this review is the willingness or not of female Muslim health worker to become 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> wife. Closely related to this is the readiness of either of the individuals and as divorcees with children from prior marriage to enter into a new marriage with his and/or her children.

### Conclusion

The reviewers concluded that the poor marriage rate among Muslims in the health sector in Nigeria can be traced to several barriers. These are especially from the economic, social, legal, political and unIslamic factors. The review also suggested multiple pragmatic solutions in bridging the deepening and widening marriage deterrent gap among Muslim healthcare providers.

Importantly, it takes us back to the basis, which will reshape our attitude, belief and life purpose to that which makes us the best generation for both here and hereafter.

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Conflict of interest: Nil



GHI is a Non-Governmental Public Health Organization using evidence-supported approach to struggle against all forms of addictions through rapid roll out of public awareness, power and resources to scale down addiction and addiction-related activities and timely scale-up of professional services like addiction counseling, treatment and rehabilitation