

Muslim Gays Seek Lesbians For Wives

Social Pressures Push Some Into Sexless Marriage

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By Ayesha Akram
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On a Web site for gay South Asians, 27-year-old Syed Mansoor uploaded the following message last summer:

"Hi, I am looking for a lesbian girl for marriage. I am gay but I would like to get married because of pressure from parents and society. I would like this marriage to be a 'normal' marriage except for the sex part, please don't expect any sexual relationship from me. Being an Indian gay person, I believe it is so much worth it to give up sex and have a nice otherwise normal family. We can be good friends and don't have to repent all our life for being gay/lesbian."

Across the globe and especially in America, hundreds of other gay Muslims have started to pursue marriages of convenience--or MOC, as they are known-- in which gay Muslims seek out lesbian Muslims, and vice versa, for appearances' sake.

Mansoor works as an accountant in New York and is a devout Muslim. He abstains from drinking alcohol or eating pork and is particular about offering early morning prayers.

To his friends on Wall Street, he is a financial whiz; to his parents, a devoted son. But Mansoor is also part of a burgeoning trend of gay Muslims adopting marriages of convenience. Hard statistics are hard to come by, but on a single Web site for South Asian gays and lesbians seeking such marriages, almost 400 requests had been uploaded. They ranged from a desperate plea from Atlanta ("I just finished medical school, and the pressure for me to get married is becoming ridiculous. I can't have a conversation with my parents without them pressuring me") to a straightforward one from Texas ("I will not object to her having sex with other women").

Mansoor credits the Internet for making these marriages a real possibility for gay Muslims. Gay activists agree and say that in recent years they have seen a rise in such marriages among Muslims.

Jack Fertig, a co-coordinator for al-Fatiha, a national advocacy group for gay Muslims, says he comes across at least one such e-mail request every month. "It's obvious that this is becoming a viable option," he said. "People are seeking, looking and trying to make connections that could develop into such marriages."

Other activists say gay Muslims are resorting to these unions for reasons of self-preservation.

"Marriages of convenience are the result of gay Muslims wanting to avoid emotional and physical harm to themselves," says Muhammed Ali, a board member of Homan, a Los Angeles-based support group for gay Iranians.

Homosexuality is a crime punishable by death in much of the Islamic world. In Iran last year, two gay teenagers were publicly executed, while in Afghanistan, the Taliban government would torture homosexuals by collapsing walls on them. Though gay Muslims in America don't have such fears, they still seek out marriages of convenience as a way of staying in the closet. Many of them worry about being ostracized from their families if their secret is revealed.

A marriage of convenience is the perfect solution, Mansoor said. "It's a great option," he said. "I get married to a lesbian, we sleep in different rooms and remain friends. Meanwhile, I can have a boyfriend." Mansoor is also willing to throw a financial incentive into the deal. A year has passed since he posted his request on an online discussion board, and, as yet, he has received no replies. But he continues to hope. "Now that I have a good job and earn handsomely, my family keeps asking, 'Why don't you find a wife?' " he said. "I plan to have a marriage of convenience just to satisfy the world."

Muslim authorities around the world have repeatedly emphasized that homosexuality is not permissible. Muzammil Siddiqi of the Islamic Society of North America said there is no flexibility on this topic. "Homosexuality is a moral disorder. It is a moral disease, a sin and corruption. . . . No person is born homosexual, just like no one is born a thief, a liar or murderer," he said. "People acquire these evil habits due to a lack of proper guidance and education."

Mainstream Islamic scholars also take an unfavorable view of MOCs. The face of Imam Omar, a scholar at the Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan, crinkled with laughter when he was asked about this phenomenon. "These people are Muslims?" he asked. Omar receives all sorts of inquiries and is now rarely taken aback. But a query about marriages of convenience stunned him. "What kind of marriage is this?" he asked. "A *nikah* [marriage] in Islam needs to be consummated. There is no concept of marriage in Islam without sexual relations."

Although some gay men feel a union of convenience is the best option, Rachel Sussman, a marriage counselor in New York, said they may not know what they are getting into. "It's opening up a Pandora's box," she said. "What happens if his partner falls in love with someone? What happens if he falls in love with someone who is not okay with him being married?" Sussman says that arrangements can potentially lead to depression, anxiety and severe marital distress.

But Ali of Los Angeles disagrees. He doesn't think MOCs are any healthier than other arrangements. "If you look at our traditional culture, marriages were usually marriages of consensus and convenience and not necessarily emotional marriages," he said. "If two people care enough about each other to help each other out, who is to say they won't have a good marriage?"