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| **Participants(s): (Initials) Name** | R | Respondent |

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| **I** | So, if I start with the first question. So, can you tell us about the last wedding ceremony you conducted in England and Wales? Specifically focussing on the type of ceremony and location. If the last ceremony was during Covid times, if you wouldn’t mind telling me about the pre-Covid ceremony. |
| **R** | It was actually two weeks ago in my mosque, the last one, so you don’t want that. |
| **I** | I think there would have been a lot of restrictions [laughs]. |
| **R** | Yeah, of course. There were, yes. So, did it in the mosque, yes. But okay, you don’t want to hear about that? |
| **I** | Can you remember your last pre-Covid ceremony? |
| **R** | Yeah, the… [laughs] okay, that was another one in… a few actually in Covid, but… pre-Covid ones… |
| **I** | Well, okay. Tell us about the Covid one. |
| **R** | Yes. Well, I’ve done a few of the Covid ones. One I did in my mosque, two weeks ago. Again, the groom from [city] and the girl is from [city]. And, you know, the parents were there. The family from [groom’s city] was there. It was obviously limited numbers. And they wanted to do it in the house. I said, “No, I want you to come into the mosque. It’s, you know, it’s much better here.”  So, we had a few of their men in the mosque. The women in the hall behind the mosque.  And I did say to them, you know, in fact, “My certificate that I give… Nikah certificate… says that this is only valid once the civil marriage has taken place.” [laughs] We just do a… just to encourage them to... look for God’s sake, go and get… They did say they were going to do it, but I don’t know.  So, I did one about three or four months ago in somebody’s garden. It was in Covid times. So, they’d put a marquee up and then I think it was about 30 people were allowed in that time. So, we had one then.  And then, I did one in [city]. One of the restaurants was booked. So, I did one there as well.  And all of them did say they would register with their… you know, they would register it as a civil marriage as well. |
| **I** | So, in terms of the ceremony itself, so you’ve mentioned the locations, what was the ceremony like? |
| **R** | Oh, the way I conduct it is very simple. I first… obviously, we get them to fill in the pre-marriage form, which is really the Nikah Nama really. So, they fill in that. They complete that and, on that day, they bring it, and they give it to me. And then I, you know, they actually nominate their two witnesses. After looking at the form and who the witnesses are and the father, I would then ask the father and the two witnesses to come with me to get the permission and the consent of the bride. Along with the dowry money. Or if they’re going to pay it then or if it’s deferred, then we would write that.  So, I would go to the girl’s side. Get that consent from her and I usually make that a little ceremonious by doing a little *dhikr* and some short talk amongst the ladies who are sitting there.  And after she’s given the consent, there’s a way that I ask her to do that, and then if the dowry was paid, then we would hand that over. And then I would ask her to join the men’s hall where the groom is sitting with me. I ask her to come and join me as soon as the groom has accepted, okay? I wouldn’t… as in presence of the witnesses, we would get the groom to do the acceptance or the qabul. Once he’s done that, I ask the bride to come with her parents. So, she will then walk up to the table. She would sit there. So, both of them would now be… because they’re married effectively… they would sit, and I would give my Khutba and do the prayer. That’s how I do it. |
| **I** | Okay. Wonderful. Thank you for the detail. So, has Covid had a major impact then on the way in which you would have conducted ceremonies? |
| **R** | Well, [laughs] first the numbers are very small. Yes and… Yeah, that’s all it is, it’s the number… for me, it really doesn’t… I do that and then I leave, so I’m not really interested in what they do afterwards, in terms of their reception, or… So, it’s not really… in that way, it hasn’t… I think it’s reduced and there were several that were planned, and they were cancelled because of the Covid, yeah. So, it’s let to cancellation of some. |
| **I** | Sure, okay. So, the second question is, is it usual to meet or otherwise communicate with the couple before the wedding ceremony? |
| **R** | Oh no. I mean, they never think about that. I mean, we’re the last thought. [laughs] It’s the last thought to have the mulvi shab?. Seriously? [laughs] Or they would ring. How ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. No, it’s never a… we’re never high on the agenda. It’s the last thought, seriously. Not joking.  It’s really… I mean I think some… I did one for a doctor. He’s educated, sensible. I think they gave me a good month’s notice or so. But the one in [city, most recently] gave two weeks’ notice. But the other local ones don’t actually bother. Seriously, a week before, “Will you come?” And that’s it. [laughs]. |
| **I** | Okay. |
| **R** | And it’s not ceremonious. It’s not… because we don’t charge… I don’t charge and, you know, it’s not really… no, it’s not regarded as a very serious part of it. Yet, it’s the most important in many ways, but it’s not given that prominence sadly. |
| **I** | Aw, okay. So, if they’re not contacting you beforehand and there’s no real meeting or otherwise communicating, is there any point at which you have a discussion with them about marriage, and about, you know, even the legal status? So, do you think you have a role in advising the couple on the legal status? |
| **R** | All right and what I… if they’re sensible and they ring me well before, I usually ask them a few very important questions and I do ask them to please get the bride and the groom to talk to me. And sometimes they do. Most of the time, the parents take on everything on their head. And then I ask them things like what’s the dowry? And are you going to get it registered? So, those are my two important questions. What’s the dowry and this… and how well do you know the other side? What have you done about it? That’s about, I think, three of four questions that I would ask usually.  I ask about dowry in particular because many of them just don’t care about it, particularly the Pakistani community. They don’t care. You know, they’ll say, “Fifty pounds?” I’ll say, “You’re an idiot! This isn’t a pakora. This isn’t a samosa you’re buying.” [laughs] You know, kill us. Honestly, they’re just crazy.  So, I encourage them to look, you know. This isn’t a joke. Particularly the bride’s side. I tell them, “Look you’ve got to put your foot down. This is about… this is a legal contract.” The Quran called it *mitha qun’ghaliza*, a very solemn pledge. It’s a contract. And you’ve got to get the, you know, ask for… it’s about dignity and honour.  So, you know, I told this doctor, and they made a demand of ten thousand pounds. I said, “You should be asking for ten thousand.” Of course, they are a very rich family anyway, so they gave them ten thousand pounds. “It’s nothing. No problem.” I said, “Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” You know, if you didn’t ask, then he would have given you fifty pounds. That’s ridiculous! That’s not…  So, the dowry is a serious issue among the Pakistani community. They don’t care about it. They don’t give it prominence.  And then the other one about getting it registered. Promise. Then I don’t know what happens afterwards. I’m not really… I don’t follow it up. |
| **I** | Sure. If I can just probe a little bit. You know with the mahr that you mentioned. What significance is there attached to it then? Because you’ve mentioned that, you know, if they try to pass off a nominal sum, you will intervene. What is the significance of it? |
| **R** | Well, I regard the *haq mahr* as a good, sort of, insurance policy which would make the other side also respect value. And also think very seriously about the consequences and that they’re going into something very valuable. I think it’s about making people realise this is a very serious, both spiritual, but also monetary and material contract as well. I think you’ve to have those two to highlight that material significance of Nikah really. That look, “You’ve got to give this amount.” Yes. |
| **I** | Okay. Thank you. |
| **R** | It’s for that purpose. And also, to make the mother-in-law very careful. You know, because she’s normally the one who’ll be giving her, you know, the gold ornament [?] Just to think very carefully when she makes any that… |
| **I** | Sure. [laughs]. Okay, I sort of skipped a question and asked the question about the legal status. If I can go back to question three. So, do you feel that the ceremonies you conduct are part of a process towards a legally binding ceremony? So, the Nikah then is a step in a process that will, at some point, include a legally binding ceremony. |
| **R** | That’s right, yes. I’m… yes. I would. And, as I said, the fact that we write on it that this is not legally valid on the Nikah very clearly and sign it, is to emphasise that point. Yes. |
| **I** | Okay. Thank you. So, in terms of the ceremonies that you conduct, where do they generally take place? |
| **R** | Well, a lot of people want them to be done in their homes, which I totally dislike. I’m telling them, “No, I want you to come here and have it done in the mosque.” So, some people do accept that. Others don’t and we have to go… or I send my Imams then to their home to do it.  Some people are doing it… we’ve done some in restaurants and hotels and wherever the banquet suite is, sometimes. So, I think there’s a… possibly, you know, I would say about fifteen to twenty per cent, perhaps, in the mosque. Bit more than that in homes and a lot of it now is taking place in actually the… where they have the reception. |
| **I** | Sure. Okay, that’s fine. So, in terms of your role in conducting the Nikah, have you seen a change in demand in the last ten years? So, have there been more or less people who want just this religious marriage? |
| **R** | I can’t actually make any sort of… I normally get… I mean I have ten Imams and each one of them is contacted by you know, from different mosques and locations. I normally get about seven, eight. So, I’ve not seen a big change, you know, in that number, year-on-year, to be honest. |
| **I** | Okay. That’s fine. So, in terms of your role as an Imam who’s conducting Nikahs, why is it important to be able to conduct these ceremonies? |
| **R** | Well, obviously for us, it’s a religious duty we have to, you know, and in a way, it’s an honour… A lot of them, actually… usually mine are usually my own students from [city] or even a wider field. Actually, people who’ve studied with me, know me, and that’s why they come to me. So, it’s that sort of relationship as well. |
| **I** | Okay. So, in terms of this religious duty, would you mind just elaborating a little bit on that? |
| **R** | Well, you know, one of our duties to encourage young people to get married. Encouraging, you know, intentionally and consistently, I think, we should be encouraging young people to get married and supporting them in that. And this is one way of doing that, actually. You know, we were actually there to support them. Yes. |
| **I** | Okay. |
| **R** | And I actually set up a… one of my lady students… well, about five, six years ago, I encouraged her to set up a marriage, sort of, company in which she actually helps people to get married. So now, you know, rather than me having to help people, I forward them to [name]. “Hey look, go to [name of company] and she’ll sort you out.”  So, I think it’s a responsibility that we all… yes. |
| **I** | So, in terms of the ceremony itself, why is it important to perform… for you to be able to conduct the Nikah? So, you’ve explained really nicely how, you know, there’s a wider role in terms of the need to ensure the community, especially young people, are getting married et cetera. But if you think in the UK context, you’re an Imam, why is it important that you can perform the Nikah? |
| **R** | Well, it’s sometimes identity, you know, of the community, of the Muslims and also, I think it’s also emphasising that how important the family life is and how important it is to begin a family in this way. This is the beginning of a family, really. You know, it’s important to bless it and get it started and give them that sense of you belong to a community of faith. |
| **I** | Okay. Thank you. So, the next question. Has there been any change in your own role since you began conducting Nikah ceremonies? For example, has there been a change in the way… the form of the ceremony that you conduct? So, over the years, do they want slightly different things? |
| **R** | I mean, yes, well I’ve been… yes, we have actually, over the years now, it’s become a… well, over the last four or five years, we started moving into these reception suites and banquets and really very posh places. [laughs]. I mean, normally it would have been done in a dingy room in a house. That was the normal situation. Or some in the mosques, but now it’s, as I said, nearly fifty per cent are done in these posh marriage halls. So, yes, it is actually… and I’ve changed my own way, as I said to you, we now get the bride also to join on the men table in front of the hundreds of people. And we do the Du’aa there. So, I’ve changed it and people have liked that format, I think. |
| **I** | So, what prompted you to change that? |
| **R** | I think it was just a gradual sort of… making it much more… well, one of the reasons is people are less squeamish now about men and women sitting. They’re already sitting on mixed tables anyway. So, I thought that was, you know, there is nothing to be squeamish about it. It’s really weird that, you know, there’s men and women sitting together but you can’t put the bride and the groom together on the same table after you’ve done the Nikah. So, it wasn’t a big leap of imagination.  But I think it was a… yeah, it’s been a gradual sort of process in which I’ve changed the way I do the ceremony and I think a lot of people, young people certainly like it. And that’s one of the reasons that I think some of them invite me from different places, if they’ve seen me doing it in that way.  And I think I also give a Khutba in which I’m talking about the importance of marriage. It’s moral and spiritual values as well as how… to the significance of it. And I normally praise both the bride and groom’s families as well. |
| **I** | So, you mention in particular young people. So, do you think they’re the ones who are now setting the agenda around how the marriage… what the ceremony looks like? |
| **R** | So, yes, of course, yeah. Yes, it’s mainly the girls, I think, are the ones who want it that way. And… |
| **I** | What do you think influences that? |
| **R** | Some of them specifically ask their parents who want [name of D-131] to do it. [laughs] You know? Yeah, so even though they do… yes. |
| **I** | Okay, great. Okay, so are you an authorised person as far as marriages are concerned? |
| **R** | We are… yes, you know, we’ve registered our mosque nearly ten years ago as a place of marriage. Rotten civil marriage people [haven’t] given us the register. So, every time, people have to… they still have to go to the marriage registration, and then the registrar or the superintendent comes to do it.  They’ve been so… you know, it’s that idea of not trusting the Muslims to give us the certificate… the register. And so, as a consequence, that’s again an off-putting factor for people to register there and then pay extra for the superintendent to come into the mosque and to do both the civil and the Islamic Nikah.  They’ve been very rotten with us, but that’s I presume, they’re just saying, “Oh, we want to keep our hands on our register ourselves and not give it to…” Yet we fulfil all the conditions. We’ve got a safe, proper safe. I know what I’m doing very clearly. I’ve done it a couple of times with the superintendents and well, I conduct it all. But no, they’ve been a nasty bunch. |
| **I** | Oh, okay. |
| **R** | But, hey. |
| **I** | So, are you then an authorised person? So, obviously the building is one question, it becoming registered for marriage. |
| **R** | No. So, we don’t do the civil… no we don’t. Well, we only do the civil when somebody goes there and then the superintendent comes. We’ve done several of those as well over the last ten years. |
| **I** | Okay. |
| **R** | So, you know, people say, “Well what’s the point? We can go and do it there.” And pay that extra amount for it as well. |
| **I** | Okay, sure. |
| **R** | So, yeah. We’ve had that… and we haven’t really bothered to push them either. “Okay, look. Give us that register as well and we know very well, we’re competent to do it. What’s your problem?” But we, too, haven’t been very forceful about it either. |
| **I** | So, if you… obviously, you would have more freedom if there was an individual within the mosque who was an authorised person, because then they could conduct the ceremony. Is that something that you’d…? |
| **R** | Well, no. Not true. That’s not true, actually. Not in England, is it? So, I mean, in Scotland where you have an authorised… and you can do your wedding anywhere. But the UK, it’s the place that is registered. So, any of my Imams actually, can do it with the superintendent present. But they said, because you don’t get enough… you don’t get lots of people coming to you. That is one of the reasons why we’re not giving the register to you people. |
| **I** | Mmm. |
| **R** | We’re registered. They can come and do it and they’ve done several in our mosque. Yes. |
| **I** | Okay. We’ll come back to that discussion after we’ve finished with the interview. |
| **R** | Okay. |
| **I** | Okay. You’ve explained why… you’ve explained that you’ve already engaged. That’s fine. So, you’ve mentioned that in your mosque, you can perform both legally binding and non-legally binding ceremonies. What is the approximate proportion of each? So, if think about the time period between 2015 and 2020, how many weddings would you say did both? And how many did just the Nikah? |
| **R** | I really don’t have any figures, but my sort of feeling is perhaps, you know, over half would also get registered. My feeling is that. More than half would perhaps get registered as well. |
| **I** | Okay. That’s great, thank you. Right, so what we’ll do now is we’ll move onto the consultation paper. So, what I sent to you in the email… I’m just going to share my screen. I’ve sent this document to you in an email. Oh, where are we? |
| **R** | Yes, I’ve seen that one. The proposal? |
| **I** | Yes. Okay, so that’s, sort of, the… as I said, the document… it’s 450-page paper, so it is really, really detailed. This is just the bare bones. But if I just run over the… in outline, what the proposed reforms are.  So, in terms of giving notice and registration, each couple would give notice of their intention to marry to the registration service. The initial notice will be given online, by post or in person. So, at the moment, obviously it has to be in person.  There would be a 28-day waiting period before they would be issued with the document authorising the marriage to go ahead. If they have not given notice in person, there would need to be an in-person interview during the 28-day period.  Also, at the time of giving notice, the couple would inform the registration services who would be officiating at their wedding and the document authorising the marriage would name that person. And then the couple would take the schedule to their wedding. It would be signed by both the couple, the officiant and two witnesses once the wedding has taken place. It would then be returned to the registration service in order for the marriage to be registered.  So, you can see how there’s a completely different process being proposed.  In terms of the officiants, so this would be the Imam in his role, religious groups would be able to nominate officiants to officiate at weddings. The group making the nomination would be either an over-arching organisation or a local group. So, just a minimum number of members is 20. The names of all nominated officiants would be on a publicly accessible list held by the General Register Office.  The main duties of an officiant would be to ensure that both parties freely exchange consent to the marriage in the presence of two witnesses and that the schedule was signed. So, they have a role to oversee the process and the documentation. The officiant could also lead the ceremony. However, this is not a requirement of the role and it would be possible for a different person to take responsibility for leading the ceremony as long as the officiant is present.  So, you can see how that gives added flexibility to a Nikah, for example. So, it can be, you know, an Imam… any other Imam who conducts it.  And then just the offence that could arise here, is it would be an offence to pretend to be an officiant and deliberately and recklessly mislead a couple about the effect of the ceremony. However, a failure to comply with the duties of an officiant would not be an offence, although it might lead to de-authorisation.  So, what that again does is it ringfences any criminal liability and keeps it very much in line with the current law, which is that unless an officiant has deliberately said to a couple, “Oh yeah, you’re legally married,” when they aren’t. Then generally, it would fall outside of any criminal sanction.  Okay. |
| **R** | You know, when I read that phrase you know, I said, “Welcome. You are following what my village officiant does.” So, really that British law is catching up with my [laughs] primitive village way. This is how we do it in Pakistan. |
| **I** | Yeah. |
| **R** | So, have a local official who has certificates, he’s appointed by the council of Sharia and he would come into the house, or wherever the… and the Imam would be there as well. The Imam would obviously do the Du’aa and the actual things. But the official does all the paperwork.  So, I’m really pleased that they’re following… they’re catching up now. [laughs]. Wow! |
| **I** | [laughs] More flexibility. The final point is just the ceremony, so there would be no legal restrictions on the types of places in which marriages could be legally celebrated. So, again, a real move away from current law. |
| **R** | That’s good. Yeah. |
| **I** | Okay so, in light of that, my first question is would the proposed reforms make it easier for the types of ceremonies that you perform to be legally binding? |
| **R** | Yes, I think this would be far… yeah, this is good. Yeah, I think this is just being… it increases our flexibility. Yes, it’s good. Yeah. |
| **I** | Good. Excellent. Would any of the proposals give rise to problems for the types of ceremonies you conduct? |
| **R** | No. |
| **I** | You can’t see any problems at all? No? |
| **R** | No, I think this is simple. It’s easier and it’s… no, I really can’t see that. I mean, it’s already working very well in places like Pakistan and other places. It’s very… it works. It makes sense, yeah. |
| **I** | Okay. How do you think the proposals might impact on the process of getting married amongst the different types of couples whose weddings you conduct? So, if you think about the Muslim community, how would these proposals impact on their existing process of getting married? |
| **R** | I don’t think it would impact in any way. Oh, I did one of a Somali couple in [city] as well. And no… it wouldn’t at all. You know, it’s very similar. I think they’re all sort of… yeah, I think, you know, there’s only two real conditions of the consent of the bride and the groom and the two witnesses. So, we all follow the same.  The other things are just ceremonious and cultural. So, I don’t think there’s any problem. |
| **I** | Do you think it would make it easier for them to achieve a legally binding ceremony if they wanted that? |
| **R** | Well, of course it would, wouldn’t it? I mean, yeah. That would… obviously it makes it… This would be legally binding, isn’t it? I mean when the officiant is… |
| **I** | Mmm. |
| **R** | …he… yeah. So, this is actually two-in-one really, isn’t it? |
| **I** | Yep. |
| **R** | Or is it the other way round? [laughs] It’s… |
| **I** | Well, yeah, it’s streamlined. Yeah. |
| **R** | You’re getting two-for-one. You’re getting two for the price of one! Yes. [laughs]. It makes a lot of sense. It’s time we had this two-for-one, yes. |
| **I** | Okay, great. And is there anything else you would like to say about the proposals? So, when you were reading through it… I mean, you mentioned how you reflected on how things are done in Pakistan. Anything else that you… any sort of response that you had to reading it? |
| **R** | I think it’s much simpler and it’s better this way. It just makes… and it sort of streamlines it. It removes that dichotomy of the civil marriage and the Nikah, you know, which is a ridiculous, sort of, dichotomy.  Although, in some ways, it’s actually very good for our young people. They can get out of it what they want. You know, just walk out when they like to and it diminishes, of course, in some ways. But it takes away that. It makes it more responsible in some ways. Yes, yes. It would be…  Well, yeah, it takes away that freedom in some ways that some young people might be thinking, “Okay, well we’ll just experiment for… see how well it works and we won’t have any problems, you know.” But nowadays, I don’t think people are much interested in big properties and those sorts of things anyway, to be honest. And there are lots of other things that prevent having real struggles in finance as well, I think. Except if you’re very rich, you might be thinking… but I’m sure they’ve got ways of getting out of them as well.  So, I think in many ways, it’s straightforward and it’s better. Yeah. It removes that nonsensical idea that it’s got to be a… as though this isn’t legal and that is legal and yeah, I think it’s a good way of overcoming that. |
| **I** | Okay, thank you. So, that’s all of the questions with regards to the Law Commission’s proposals. Is there anything else you would like to say about the marriage process? Or any other thoughts you’d like to share? |
| **R** | You know, this idea that they can get married anywhere is actually much more flexible. It creates that flexibility. I think it’s good although, as a person of mosque and organisation, we’d love to have it done only in the mosque, so we get fees and all that, but I don’t think that’s a… and give the religion some kind of… and institutional thing. But I don’t think that’s a clever idea, as the Church did.  No, we wouldn’t like to have that. No, I think this flexibility’s good that you can have it anywhere and just give that flexibility. No, I think it’s got to be flexible, easy and what is really important for the community itself to do is to actually prepare people and get them to really understand what they’re going in for by having, sort of, pre-marriage courses and… I wrote in a book actually… I wrote one about 20 years ago. *[title of book]*. |
| **I** | Oh, okay. |
| **R** | And we’ve just published it as a Kindle version as well, for young people before they get married. I used to give a copy as a gift to people when I did their marriage. So, yeah, we need to do those sorts of proposals, I think, just to help them understand and to increase and improve, you know, their success rate really. That’s all it’s about. Supporting them to be successful really. |
| **I** | Okay, so that’s the end of the questions so I will stop with recording. |
| **0:32:23** |  |