

UK Sisters Face the Challenges of Conversion

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When I asked at our weekly circle for new Muslim sisters, "What was the biggest challenge you faced after taking your *shahadah*?" I was surprised by their answer. I expected them to say things like: learning how to pray, working out how to tell my family, changing to a halal diet, developing a social life that doesn't include alcohol, feeling isolated, adjusting to the new dress code, learning new ways of relating to men and learning how to say "no" to people without upsetting them. They did say all those things, eventually, but the first answer they came up with surprised me; two sisters immediately said: "To stop plucking my eyebrows!"

Why was this such a challenge?

Because it involved stopping something that's such an ingrained part of western culture that many women don't think twice about. And it's also something that's more difficult to explain to others (even born Muslims sometimes) and that they probably hadn't expected to consider when they accepted this beautiful faith.

New Muslim sisters often want to be the best Muslims they can be and want to follow the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, to the best of their ability. So they check out the Hadith, the fatwa sites and the Islamic TV channels, and come across issues such as plucking eyebrows, tattoos, the fitrah (natural disposition) shaving, etc. And these practices become the subject of many cautious discussions, until the sister adjusts to her new culture and finds others who practice the same things to normalize them for her.

Learning to Pray

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The first challenge that most new Muslims face is learning how to pray. It's not just an issue of learning the meanings and how to recite them in Arabic, but there are also the additional challenges if sisters are still living with their parents of how to explain it to them, if they go out to work will they be allowed to pray at work and how people will respond to them, and how to cope with praying on a day out shopping!

At The Sheffield New Muslim Project, we help sisters learn how to pray through a Prayer Pack that we give to all new Muslims, which includes a CD of the Arabic recitations and handy A5 booklets that take them through all the stages of a two, three or four-rakat prayer. If a sister doesn't have a friend or husband who can help them to learn how to pray, we assign them a

mentor. Through the support of the mentor and the other sisters in the circle, they get suggestions of the ways others have coped with similar challenges, and this eventually gives them the courage to deal with their own.

Telling the Family

One of the biggest challenges that nearly every sister faces is how to break the news to their families that they have accepted Islam. Especially now, with all the bad press that Islam and Muslims are getting, most converts anticipate a rocky ride when they tell their families. There is no one way to do this; every family is unique, as are their relationships. We find the most useful way to approach this is to share with new sisters the ways that worked for others in the group, and through this the new convert may find ideas that will work for them in their situation. Some sisters like to first develop a foundation of knowledge to help them answer the questions they may face, others drop gentle hints until their families realize what has happened without having to be told, others share their journey with their families and others just try to find the right time to tell their families.

Changing to a Halal Diet

Another major issue that new Muslims have to face is diet, especially those who are living with a non-Muslim family. Questions are raised such as how can I tell them I can't eat pork? Can I eat food from a kitchen where non-halal food is cooked? Can I still eat at McDonalds or KFC? If I can't eat there, where can I go to eat? Can I sit with people who are drinking alcohol? If I can't what sort of social life can I have?

Once they have the support of new Muslim friends, new or born Muslims, this becomes easier. All these issues can create massive challenges for a new Muslim, depending on their situation and their previous social and family life. Most people tackle these issues slowly and gradually, as they increase their knowledge and faith, especially as they are trying to maintain good relations with their families. Once they have the support of new Muslim friends, new or born Muslims, this becomes easier.

Developing an Alcohol-Free Social Life

To help make the transition easier, we arrange get-togethers for new sisters in each other's homes, in restaurants or parks, or evenings out at the cinema. This not only gives the sisters a chance to have some down-time when they can feel 'normal' and share ideas, hopes and fears, but as most of our get-togethers also involve food, it's a great chance for some sisters to realize that halal food doesn't necessarily mean Asian or Arabic food and that you can have fun without alcohol!

Most sisters are quite happy not to drink, but as it's such a pervasive part of western social life,

not drinking can be one of the main things that distances new Muslims from their families and particularly their old friends. So creating a new social life with other converts and empathetic others is vital.

Wearing Hijab

Adjusting to wearing the hijab and the Islamic dress code is something that some sisters dive into quite quickly, when they are riding high on their new wave of faith. Others take longer, especially those living at home with non-accepting families. These sisters usually take small baby steps, gradually adjusting their clothing, wearing a scarf at Islamic functions initially and gradually wearing longer and looser clothing. Some sisters, especially those who were introduced to Islam by someone from a Muslim culture may choose to adopt their cultural dress to help them feel part of the community. Others adapt western style clothing to keep a sense of their own cultural identity.

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It takes a while for some sisters to feel comfortable following the Islamic dress code, they don't want to stand out as being different from everyone else, and wearing hijab is the most obvious sign that others notice. But as they grow in their faith, this transition is part of who they are becoming and it becomes more natural and eventually second nature.

Cross-Gender Relations

Another of the most challenging aspects of conversion for many sisters is adjusting the way they relate to men. They have grown up in free-mixing environments, where dating is the norm and where looking everybody straight in the eye is seen as a sign of honesty.

The fact that many of sisters come to Islam through dating a Muslim man can cause a lot of confusion as to the difference between Islam's teachings and the culture of many Muslim communities, and it can take some time for sisters to find the best way for them to follow Allah's commands.

Saying "No"

The last thing that the sisters mentioned was how difficult they found it to say "no" to doing things that they had previously done with friends and family without upsetting them. Their new faith is telling them to be good and kind especially to their families, and yet they have to say "no" to taking part in certain things in obedience to Allah.

Sometimes family members feel insulted, criticized or rejected by a new Muslim who is over enthusiastic or struggling to adjust to their new life and may be expressing themselves clumsily. It can take a lot of time and patience to heal those rifts, but with support, and

increased knowledge and faith, most sisters manage to come to an understanding with most of their family members, for after all, whatever their differences, they are still family.

Advice to Sisters

If you are a sister struggling with these or other issues due to your conversion to Islam, I would highly recommend that you seek out your local support group for new Muslims. Ask around at local mosques or Islamic book shops, or even if you see someone else who looks like a new Muslim.

If you can't find one locally and you can't move to somewhere where there is one, get in contact with the national support organizations and attend their functions whenever possible. And .most importantly seek out sound sources of knowledge