

British Muslim women take time out

By Sonia Malik

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British Islam's bad girls are increasingly using their time at university to challenge the kind of life that their parents, imams and more pious peers want them to lead

ALL they ever wanted was to have a little fun, just like everyone else. Struggling to balance their faith, family expectations and peer pressure, away from the Islamic Society meetings and gender-segregated Eid dinners, many Muslim young women at university are challenging the kind of life that their parents, imams and more pious peers want them to lead. These social rebels could easily be labelled British Islam's bad girls - defiant, intractable, but most definitely in charge.

It's easy to mark the campus rebels with a scarlet letter. After all, Muslim parents always thought that clubs, alcohol and sex wouldn't mix easily with the way they have brought up their children. But why are these women risking incurring the anger of their families and challenging the moral directives of their faith?

"Let's face it," confides Nazia, a student from Bradford, "at home we're constantly subjected to tyrannical parenting and hampered by endless rules which dictate our every move. University is the first and only chance a girl gets to lead her life exactly the way she wants it. Most Muslim girls don't even know what they want out of life when they first come here. They're just not used to thinking for themselves or setting their own boundaries. There's a whole learning process involved of what to do with your new-found independence. Girls are trying everything and anything because they never had the chance to decide for themselves what they like and don't like."

Kinza, a 24-year-old student from London, agrees: "My life at university involved clubbing, drinking and dating. Most of the things I got involved in were pursued purely out of curiosity. You don't put your family reputation at risk if you are at university in a different city. You don't for

one second think about marriage. You just go wild for a bit without wondering who is judging you. The drinking is part of the experience, and these days, you have to dress just to fit in rather than to stand out. Fashion is important to all girls - even girls in hijab look for their own sense of style."

For one 22-year-old medical student, university wasn't just a few years of her life, but her only opportunity to live out her entire life. "I only chose to study medicine," she says, "because the course is longer. I wanted to be away from home for longer. I know I have to live out my whole life in the span of my five-year degree because once I get home, it's back to being under my parents' thumb. Some girls here have made major life changes and intend to stick by them once their degree ends but that's impossible for me. My parents tried to make my older sister marry someone she didn't want to and she eventually ran away. That meant that their grip over me tightened considerably. It is suffocating."

The phrase "despotic families" comes up constantly. The women I speak to are scarred by their childhood experiences and feel they need to take control of their own lives. Are we breeding a generation of Muslim women with deep-rooted behavioural problems and damaged psyches?

Sarah Littlejohn, of the counselling service at Manchester University, says that many students find leaving home and the transition to adulthood difficult and there will always be a few on campus who are suffering from eating disorders and other mental health problems, most commonly rooted in family relationships. "Where girls come from restrictive and controlling families, they are often not used to setting their own boundaries with regard to things like sexual behaviour, food and drink, and may tend to oscillate between modes of behaviour that range from overly controlled to out of control. At times they may aim to mimic that strict and controlling atmosphere and at others be very unruly. Many

girls find themselves yo-yoing between these extremes."

Yasmin, a 25-year-old teacher from Leeds, says: "Having overly controlling parents can result in you becoming very bitter and rebellious if you don't see it as anything more than needless restriction. Growing up, I could not see why they did it, but now I am grateful. As a teacher I recognise that kids need boundaries. I am a strong person. I would never have been who I am now if they had not raised me that way.

"I had a curfew for everything. I had to be back from school by 3.30pm, back from college by 4pm and back from university by 6pm. My parents were strict because they were upholding their family honour, which inevitably falls on the girl's shoulders. There was no way I would ever

importance of family honour and often use all kinds of subterfuge to keep it out of the limelight. Yasmin feels differently. "If upsetting you family or their honour means something to you," she says, "then you will never go too far. Even if you put me on the other side of the world I would never go clubbing, go out with guys, wear miniskirts or drink. Parents shelter you so you don't want to ever do that."

Guarding the family honour is lonely, but Yasmin also feels that it has made her independent: "You get left out because you don't participate. I have a strong personality and didn't want to, but not everyone is. Off-the-rails girls keep going until somebody stops them."

But even today some young women don't fully realise the consequences of a reckless

At home, many Muslim girls feel they are constantly subjected to tyrannical parenting. When they arrive at university, many don't know what they want out of life, since they are not used to thinking for themselves or being allowed to set their own boundaries. At university, they use their time away to experiment in leading their lives exactly as they want to. For most, it is their only chance to be free

to go near a guy. My parents always told me if I do as much as looked at a guy they would kill me. I was not even allowed to talk to boys in school. You're so scared of breaking the little rules, you wouldn't even consider breaking the big ones.

"This has definitely affected my ability to socialise with people. I hold back from making friendships with guys. To this day I do not talk to men at work. They have to initiate the conversation and when they do, I feel uncomfortable. I prefer for them to stick to work-related topics. I don't enjoy socialising with them. It takes time to break down the mental barriers."

Most of the women I spoke to understood the

importance of family honour and often use all kinds of subterfuge to keep it out of the limelight. Yasmin feels differently. "If upsetting you family or their honour means something to you," she says, "then you will never go too far. Even if you put me on the other side of the world I would never go clubbing, go out with guys, wear miniskirts or drink. Parents shelter you so you don't want to ever do that."

"I come from a household where my comings and goings were pretty restricted," says one 26-year-old student from Cardiff. "My family is made up mostly of girls. I had no brothers or male friends to grow up with, so you could say I was quite sheltered from the realities of life as a result.

for bad behaviour

When I enrolled in university, I experienced personal freedom for the first time. I began socialising with students who appeared to be a lot more well-adjusted and sophisticated than me. By the end of my first year, I naively entered into a relationship and fell pregnant.

"There was a part of me that felt very isolated and bewildered when I first arrived at university. My boyfriend was warm and compassionate, and I felt he would look after me. I didn't even think about him having ulterior motives. I found it difficult to speak to and befriend genuine people at university, and I think that is what made me such easy prey. He knew I wasn't going to run around telling people."

Phillip Hodson, a fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy,

has worked extensively with ethnic minorities and Muslims. He believes that people who have never learned to say no can face a multitude of dilemmas. "The western model of parenting allows for a rebellious adolescence and a rejection of family values, but the eastern model can generally be a case of 'do as you are told', and unfortunately such attempts are not always successful. Being exposed to a value-free secular culture can create enormous problems when you have hitherto led a comparatively protected existence. Commonly, excessively dominating parents de-skill their children. Consequently, they are left immature in decision-making."

Aisha, a Bangladeshi Muslim from Birmingham, blames her obesity and low self-esteem on her family. Her liberation at university only heightened her sense of helplessness. "When I was doing my A-levels, I wanted to do art subjects, but my parents did not see any prospects of a good career for an arts graduate. They wanted me to do medicine so I ended up taking science-related subjects instead, and consequently performing very poorly. I was very angry about the lack of choice I was given. I have been rebelling

and screaming for help ever since then. At university I broke every rule in the book because I kept thinking these were all the other things my parents had been denying me.

"However, I was not serious about any of my flings because I knew I was destined for an arranged marriage. So many opportunities have slipped by. I now feel bitter. I find it very hard to trust anybody, since I don't even trust my own family. I have given up my job because of lack of self-confidence, and even whilst working I never had aspirations for promotions or higher paying positions. I just thought, what's the point?"

When family cultural traditions are tied so closely to Islam, experiences of growing up under lockdown and the subsequent liberation of campus life leave bitter feelings about religion that are tough to shake. "I now disrespect parents who are religious," says Aisha, "because I think they just twist religion to suit their own ends or to please their social circle. I have gone from being a *hijabi* to doubting my faith altogether. I feel that in order for there to be any change, parents need to learn how to practise Islam in a positive way, rather than using it as a weapon to condemn others. Also, we need to stop backbiting because it is the source of intense family anxiety. Girls will never be able to live out their dreams."

It is easy for imams and community leaders simply to blame "western permissiveness" for the situation of Muslim young women on the campus. This is just passing the buck. The experiences of growing up Muslim and British are complex. The challenges young Muslim women face are ones that their parents' generation never had to. The popular culture they grow up in - whether the MTV or B4U variety - is powerful. The challenge for British Muslims, therefore, is to create spaces for engaging with young people without recourse to fatwa or condemnation. Many of us are teaching our young women to hate their faith. If faith is to be an important part of our lives, then it must speak to the realities of today. COURTESY THE GUARDIAN

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