

MATRIMONY IN MINUTES?

Muslims in the UK looking for love in the 21st century have an alternative to luck or the traditional introduction routes to find their spouse. **Mary Murtagh** reports on a new wave of Islamic matrimonial events playing Cupid. Photographs by Jas Lehal

It's an unlikely venue for romance. The generic conference centre that is hosting the latest function by Muslim Marriage Events is in gritty east London and has one of the capital's busiest arterial routes with its thunderous roar outside.

The steady stream of participants, some clad in killer heels or a three-piece business suit, are not bothered. They are here to find the man or woman they hope to spend the rest of their life with.

Welcome to the world of marriage-seeking among a growing number of modern Muslims living in the West.

With familial and community introductions declining, Muslim divorce rates rising and the desire for more say in finding one's life partner increasing, events such as this are quickly becoming popular.

In just six hours, each of the 72 men will meet each of the 72 women and all will have marriage on their mind.

The event is like a combination of musical chairs and speed dating – only with higher stakes. Every attendee gets three minutes with each participant of the opposite sex. There is nervous laughter during the rehearsal as audience members get used to brutally ditching their conversation partner when the stopwatch beeps.

Among them is the Briton Adam Sattar, 38, who is determined to capitalise on his nearly 10,000km round trip from Dubai, where he

has worked as a financial adviser for the past five years. He decided to attend while on business in London because he feared his age would mean being left on the shelf.

With a luxury apartment in Dubai Marina and a jet-set lifestyle, there is one part of the jigsaw missing – a wife to share it all with.

“I feel really down and have almost given up hope that I will ever find the one,” he says. “My friends tell me I would make a lovely husband and father and that is what I want for myself. I want to marry a woman in her 20s but I get knocked off everyone's list because of my age, although people tell me that face-to-face I do not look that old. I did get engaged when I was 26 but it did not work out and I was left disillusioned and heartbroken. This event is excellent because it puts Muslim women with the same goal – to get married – in front of you.

“In an ideal world, my wife would be Muslim like me, but as I get older that is less important to me. I am looking for someone kind, considerate and caring. With me, she would have a good standard of living with an international lifestyle.”

He says he has been unsuccessful searching for a potential spouse in Dubai.

“There are no events like this in the city to meet them,” he says, adding: “Whenever I have met women in Dubai, my age is a stumbling block.”

Sattar is in good company. Many young

Muslims in their 20s and 30s are putting off getting married until later in life to allow themselves a chance to study and climb the career ladder before settling down. Singles in their 30s, 40s and older are a big market for Muslim Marriage Events, which runs a 30-plus event to meet the demand.

Time and again, those looking for their soulmate at the event have the same complaint – it is hard to find a Muslim mate in these modern times. The traditional routes of family introductions and community connections are not available or simply haven't worked for many of them.

The UK-based matrimonial website SingleMuslim.com, which works in partnership with Muslim Marriage Events, has more than 500,000 members worldwide, of which 130,000 signed up last year in the UK alone.

That is a picture seen across the Muslim world; the UAE is the sixth most active country on the website, with more than 6,300 new recruits joining last year, taking the total number from the Emirates to 24,511.

Some are hoping for better luck second time around, for in some countries, such as Malaysia, half of all Muslim marriages end in divorce. In the UAE that figure is one in four, with 40 per cent involving couples in their 20s.

The participants gathering on a frosty January day in Ilford, east London, are a



Nighat Bishir makes some notes on her checklist at a Muslim Marriage Event in east London.