

GUIDELINES

For Ex-Muslims and
Frontline Practitioners



Purpose of the guidelines

The Guidelines for Ex-Muslims and Frontline Practitioners has been developed to provide information for ex-Muslims on their rights and the resources available to them. The *Guidelines* also provide information to frontline practitioners, such as the police, teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers on the specific circumstances of ex-Muslims.

Guidelines for Ex-Muslims and Frontline Practitioners

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Introduction

Apostasy (the renunciation of Islam) is punishable by death under Sharia law in a number of countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. Whilst ex-Muslims in Britain are free to leave Islam without fear of execution, many leave quietly or remain 'closet unbelievers' due to death threats, violence, or expulsion from their family and loved ones.

The Council of Ex- Muslims of Britain (CEMB) was established in June 2007 to break the taboo surrounding apostasy, demand an abolition of punishment for apostasy, and to support and pave the way for those who want to leave Islam. Clearly, one's religion or atheism is a private affair but not when one is threatened with death because of it; then a public renunciation becomes a form of resistance.

Since the establishment of the CEMB, hundreds of ex-Muslims have contacted the organisation to disclose problems related to the renunciation of Islam but also with regard securing much needed support.

The following *Guidelines* are an attempt to provide much needed information to ex-Muslims and front line practitioners.

Ex-Muslims: important points

Freedom of religion and belief is a human right

Everyone in the UK has the freedom of religion and belief, which is a fundamental human right protected by a number of international treaties and declarations. This right encompasses freedom of thought on all matters. No matter what your family or the wider community says and irrespective of your race, sex, age, and background, you have this fundamental right.

Know how to protect yourself

If you are worried about your personal safety, take it seriously. Consider the risk and whether you should involve the police.

Open a separate/secret bank or savings account.

Leave copies of important documents such as passport, National Insurance number and birth certificate along with spare clothing and cash with a trusted friend.

Keep helpline numbers close at hand. Have a telephone card or change for urgent phone calls.

Arrange alternative emergency accommodation in case of need.

Your internet, e-mail and document use activities leave traces on your computer that can be found. Use a computer to which those you are fearful of do not have access to, such as at work, in a library, or a friend's computer. Cover your tracks when searching for information, emailing about your situation or visiting sites and web-forums like those of the CEMB if you are using a computer that others may have access to.

Know that you are not alone

There are many people who are in or have been in your situation. Don't despair. It really helps to meet other like-minded people who know what you are going through.

You can do this by becoming a member of the CEMB, coming to its events, joining the CEMB's web forum and going to local meet-up groups and meetings. There are also many local humanist, secularist and atheist groups in various parts of the country that would be more than happy to lend a hand. They also have regular meetings, where you can meet like-minded people and get support.

Help is at hand

Make sure you know about your rights and options so that you can make informed choices. There are many organisations that provide assistance and support. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Frontline agencies: important points

Respect the person's choices

Practitioners should listen to the ex-Muslim who approaches them and respect their wishes whenever possible. Disclosures of fear as a result of leaving Islam should not be dismissed as merely a family matter – for many people, seeking help from an agency is a last resort and therefore all disclosures should be taken seriously.

Do not involve the family

Involving families in such cases is dangerous. It may increase the risk of serious harm. Experience shows that the family may not only punish the ex-Muslim for seeking help but also deny that the person is being threatened.

Involving the family includes visiting them to ask whether they are intending to prevent the ex-Muslim from leaving Islam or writing a letter requesting a meeting with them about the ex-Muslim's allegation.

Do not use community leaders, neighbours, and relatives as interpreters

Do not use family members, friends, neighbours or those with influence in the community as interpreters. People may feel embarrassed to discuss personal issues in front of them and sensitive information may be passed on to others and place the victim in danger. Furthermore, such an interpreter may deliberately mislead practitioners and/or encourage the person to drop the complaint and submit to their family's wishes.

Interview them in a private place

It is likely that the person will be anxious and distressed. The interview should take place in a private and secure venue free from interruptions, in accordance with local practices and procedures. Never speak to them in the presence of "friends."

Explain their options

If someone fears they may be forced to remain a Muslim when they don't want to, they have the following options:

- To seek legal protection;
- To leave their family, start a new life and possibly have to remain in hiding or live a life of ostracism and isolation;
- To leave their family, start a new life and prosecute their family; or
- To return to the family and hope the situation can be resolved.

There may be serious risk of harm if they choose to return to the family. To leave and start a new life can make them extremely vulnerable. Their family or spouse may search for them through routes such as housing records, benefit records, employment records and health records – however these records can be protected.

For many people prosecuting their family is something they simply will not consider.

If the victim is from overseas applying to remain in the UK is an extremely complicated process and requires professional immigration advice.

For many victims from overseas returning to their country of origin is not an option – they may be ostracised, subjected to violence or even killed.

These risks should be explained.

Many people may be extremely frightened by contact with any statutory agency as they may have been told that the authorities will deport them and/or take their children from them. Practitioners need to be extremely sensitive to these fears when dealing with a victim from overseas, even if they have indefinite leave to remain or a right of abode as they may not be aware of their true immigration status. These circumstances make them particularly vulnerable.

Establish future contacts and meetings

Agree where future meetings can take place. Establish whether they can be contacted in confidence at work, school, college, or through a trusted friend or organisation. If you are staying in contact using mobile phones, establish whether the person or another family member pays the bill, as the record of calls made may place the person at risk of harm. Make sure you have a code word to ensure that you are speaking to the right person. If you are using text messages, email or post – make sure that messages cannot be intercepted.

Do not meet them at their new home if they have moved

If they have moved, do not meet the person at their new address, refuge or friend's house as you may be followed.

Confidentiality is extremely important

A dilemma may occur because ex-Muslims may be concerned that if confidentiality is breached and their family finds out that they have sought help they will be in serious danger. On the other hand, they may already be facing serious danger because of domestic abuse, honour-based violence, rape, imprisonment, etc. Therefore, in order to protect them, it may be necessary to share information with other agencies such as the police.

Consequently, confidentiality and information sharing are going to be extremely important for anyone in a threatened situation.

Practitioners need to be clear about when confidentiality can be promised and when information may need to be shared. Circumstances sometimes arise where a child, or more probably a young person, explicitly asks a practitioner not to give information to their parents/guardians or others with some authority over them. Their request for confidentiality should be upheld. If a decision is made to disclose confidential information to another person (usually another practitioner), the practitioner should seek the consent of the person before the disclosure. Most people will consent to the disclosure if they receive a careful explanation of why the disclosure is to be made and are assured about their safety (e.g. information will not be passed to their family) and what will happen

following such a disclosure. Whether or not the person agrees to the disclosure, they must be told if there is to be disclosure of confidential information.

Also, there may be occasions when the person's family members ask a third party e.g. a family friend, councillor, MP or those with influence within the community to request information from practitioners. The third party may have been given a very plausible reason by the family for needing to know the whereabouts of the person e.g. the illness of a close relative, and the third party may unwittingly think they are helping them. These requests are often made by telephone and rely on the person making the request persuading a practitioner that they are authorised to receive information. Do not share this information.

Making enquiries

There may be occasions when it is necessary to make enquiries about someone, for example if they are being held within the home or have gone missing. In these circumstances, it is important to make discreet enquiries before approaching the family. Take care not to reveal that enquiries are related to their being an ex-Muslim. If the fact that the enquiries relate to their being an ex-Muslim needs to be shared, this should only be shared with practitioners aware of the need to handle such information appropriately.

Do not encourage or initiate family counselling, mediation, arbitration and reconciliation

Due to the threats and intimidations that may be meted out against an ex-Muslim, some of the principles within existing statutory guidelines may inadvertently place those in such situations at greater risk of harm. This includes the principle that the best place for a young person is with their family and the practice of attempting to resolve cases through family counselling, mediation, arbitration and reconciliation.

In such cases, it is important that agencies do not actively initiate, encourage or facilitate family counselling, mediation, arbitration or reconciliation – whether offered by Sharia councils, Muslim Arbitration Tribunals, imams and religious or professional groups. There have been cases of people being murdered by their families during mediation. Mediation can also place someone at risk of further

emotional and physical abuse. Family group conferences are not normally appropriate in such cases because it will often place the child or young person at greater risk of harm.

There may be occasions when someone insists on meeting with their family. It should take place in a safe location, supervised by a trained/specialist professional with an authorised accredited interpreter present, as families will sometimes threaten the person in another language.

If someone has left the family home, allowing them to have unsupervised contact with their family may be extremely dangerous. Families may use the opportunity to subject the victim to extreme physical or mental duress regardless of any protective measures that may be in place.

Personal safety advice

Research shows that leaving home can be the most dangerous time, particularly for women fleeing abuse. Therefore, if someone is planning to leave or the perpetrators suspect they might leave, they should take measures to ensure their safety. Even if someone is not ready to leave, they should still be advised of their options and helped with safety planning so they can take measures to protect themselves at home and make arrangements to leave home in an emergency. Refer them, with their consent, to appropriate local and national support groups.

Get the person to think about:

- Who they could go to in an emergency;
- Who would be able to send them money;
- All the things they may need to start a new life; and
- The possible finality of this decision and the ongoing lack of contact between them, their family and extended family.

When devising a strategy for someone over the age of 16 to leave home, they should:

- Be fully consulted as to their future needs and their wishes respected;

- Consider the risk to themselves and whether they should involve the police;
- Open a separate/secret bank or savings account;
- Leave copies of important documents such as passport, National Insurance number and birth certificate with police, social care services or a trusted friend;
- Leave spare clothing and cash etc. with a trusted friend;
- Keep helpline numbers close at hand;
- Have a telephone card or change for urgent phone calls; and
- Arrange alternative emergency accommodation should the need arise.

If the person is leaving the family home:

- Complete a safety plan before they leave the family home;
- Arrange for a social worker or specialist service worker to accompany them if they insist on returning to the family home to collect their possessions;
- If necessary, arrange for a police officer to escort the social worker/refuge worker and the person to collect their possessions;
- Ensure an accredited interpreter, who speaks the same dialect as the family, is also present, in case the family makes threats;
- Perform a risk assessment before visiting the family home;
- Advise the victim how their actions may compromise their safety;
- Take precautions to ensure that the person's identity and benefit and other records are confidential;
- Encourage them to change their bank account details and mobile phone so they cannot be traced; and
- Refer them, with their consent, to appropriate local and national support groups, counselling services and groups that have a history of working with similar situations.

DO NOT:

- Re-house locally unless specifically requested after all the risks of harm have been explained to the victim;
- Allow a woman to be accompanied by her children when returning to the family home to collect possessions; and
- Allow them to return to their home unless a risk assessment has been carried out.

Whilst it is desirable to obtain the following items, they are not as important as the person's safety. Personal possessions should include:

- Proof of identity (something with a photograph and signature e.g. passport, student ID card, photo-card driving licence or National Insurance number/card);
- Benefit books, money, cheque books, bank and credit cards;
- Medication and medical card;
- Address book, photographs, jewellery and clothing;
- Marriage/divorce papers; and
- Documents relating to immigration status.

Ask them if they want anyone to be told that they are safe and well - if so, who and what information they want given out.

Many people who remain in contact with their families once they have left home continue to be subjected to emotional pressures. This may include stories about the illness or death of parents, relatives or siblings. If such a message is received, police/social services should check the validity of the information if the person wishes.

Sometimes families use organised networks that will track their children. These networks include family and community members, bounty hunters, taxi drivers, together with people who have access to records such as staff from benefits offices, GP surgeries and local housing authorities. There may be occasions

when practitioners unwittingly give confidential information to those searching for the person.

Under 18 Ex-Muslims

People, especially those under 18, who leave home to escape the repercussions or threats related to leaving Islam, often present specific difficulties for the police and other agencies such as Children and Young People's Services. Police may feel they should inform families if the young person is found. On occasion, police and Children and Young People's Services have faced criticism both for failing to share information about a young person who has run away from home and for giving the young person practical support and protection. Ultimately, however, the first concern should be for the welfare of the young person. They may be at risk of significant harm if they are returned to their family. There have been incidents where families have killed the woman or young person after they have been located. In these situations, police and Children and Young People's Services should feel confident about justifying their actions, because experience shows that if information is shared with their family and friends it may place the person in danger.

Some families go to considerable lengths to find their children who run away and some may use subterfuge to locate and return them. For example, some families may falsely accuse a missing person of a crime (e.g. theft) in the expectation that the police will locate the person for them.

There may be occasions when someone's family asks a third party, such as, a family friend, councillor, GP, MP or those with influence in the community to request information from a practitioner. The third party may have been given a very plausible reason by the family for needing to know the whereabouts of the person (e.g. the illness of a close relative) and the third party may unwittingly think they are helping the victim. These requests are often made by telephone and rely on the person making the request persuading a practitioner that they are authorised to receive information. If you are in any doubt about such a request, consult an experienced colleague or manager.

Remember:

- Those fleeing for being ex-Muslim may be reported as missing by their families. The reason for their flight may not be apparent when the report is made;
- If police locate a young person under the age of 18, social services or the police should interview the young person (before returning them home) to establish whether it is in their best interests to return home;
- If the family locate the person, try to interview them on their own to establish why they left home, the circumstances of their return and what they want to do; and
- If someone is at risk, it may not be in their best interests if police or social services disclose information to their family, friends or members of the community.

A local authority may provide accommodation for young people between the ages of 16 and 21, if they consider that to do so would safeguard or promote the young person's welfare.

Those fleeing may need to be relocated with a different local authority, as they may not wish to live in the same area as their family.

A child or young person fleeing may not wish to be fostered with a family from their own background or community. A child or young person might wish to be fostered outside the immediate geographical area.

DO NOT:

- Inform the family, friends, colleagues or acquaintances as to the whereabouts of the person; and
- Disclose information without the express consent of the person, unless the disclosure is to other agencies and is necessary to protect the person.

Helpful organisations

Emergencies

In case of an emergency, call 999.

Networking and meeting like-minded people

If you want to meet like-minded individuals you can contact the following to find out about meetings, events and meet-ups close to you or network virtually via web forums:

Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain: Web forum: <http://www.councilofexmuslims.com/>

Ex-Muslims London Meet-up Group: <http://www.meetup.com/exmuslim-34/>

International Humanist and Ethical Union affiliated groups: <http://www.iheu.org/contacts?sort=asc&order=Country+or+region>

National Secular Society Affiliated Groups: <http://www.secularism.org.uk/join-an-affiliated-group.html>

Richard Dawkins Web forum: <http://forum.richarddawkins.net/>

Richard Dawkins Website listing of local groups in your area: <http://richarddawkins.net/localGroups>

British Humanist Association Affiliated Groups: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/meet-up/groups>

Support organisations

If you need help or want advice, you can contact any of the following organisations:

All Wales Domestic Abuse Helpline

0808 8010 800

This service provides information, support, and help, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to women experiencing domestic abuse. It can refer women and their children to refuges throughout the UK.

Ann Craft Trust

0115 951 5400

www.anncrafttrust.org

Ann Craft Trust offers advice to professionals, parents, carers and family members on issues relating to the protection of vulnerable children and adults.

Asian Family Counselling Service

020 85713933

www.asianfamilycounselling.org

This is a national service offering counselling on marital and family issues. Telephone counselling is also available.

BAWSO Women's Aid – (Wales)

0800 731 8147

www.bawso.org.uk

It provides a specialist service to women and children made homeless through a threat of domestic abuse or fleeing domestic abuse in Wales. They have purpose built refuges across Wales. They also provide emotional and practical support for women living in social housing. The service is accessible 24 hrs a day.

Carelina

020 8514 1177

This is a national counselling line for children, young people and adults on any issue including family, marital and relationship problems, child abuse, rape and sexual assault, depression and anxiety.

Child Line

0800 1111

www.childline.org.uk

This service is for any child or young person with a problem.

Citizens Advice Bureau

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

The Citizens Advice Bureau offers information and advice on a wide range of subjects including consumer rights, debt, benefits, housing, employment, immigration, family and personal matters.

CLIC

029 2046 2222

www.cliconline.co.uk

CLIC is the national information and advice service for young people in Wales aged 11–25 to help them make informed decisions in their lives.

Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain

07719166731

www.ex-muslim.org.uk

The CEMB provides information to ex-Muslims who have renounced religion. It also provides letters of support for asylum seeking ex-Muslims.

Forced Marriage Website

www.forcedmarriage.net

This website provides advice, information and contacts to help young people who fear they may be forced to marry or those who are already in a forced marriage.

Forward

020 8960 4000

www.forwarduk.org.uk

This service is dedicated to advancing and safeguarding the health and rights of African girls and women, in particular female genital mutilation and forced and child marriage.

Henna Foundation

02920 498600/496920

Henna Foundation operates a one stop service that works to meet the needs, concerns and aspirations of Asian children and families.

Honour Network

0800 5999 247

www.karmanirvana.org.uk

The Honour Network helpline provides emotional and practical support and advice for victims and survivors of forced marriage and/or honour based violence and abuse.

Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation

0207 490 0303 (9.30-5.00) or 07862 733511 (24hrs)

www.ikwro.org.uk

IKWRO provides advice, support, advocacy and referrals in Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, Dari and Farsi to women, girls and couples living in Britain, in particular with regards domestic violence, forced marriage and honour-based violence.

Language line

020 7520 1430

www.languageline.co.uk

This service can provide an interpreter on the telephone immediately in 100 different languages, 24 hours a day. This is not a free service.

Local Women's Aid

www.womensaid.org.uk

Women's Aid is a national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children. They support a network of over 500 domestic and sexual violence services across the UK.

Men's Advice Line

0808 801 0327

www.mensadvice.org.uk

This service provides a helpline for all men experiencing domestic violence by a current or ex-partner in heterosexual or same-sex relationships.

MIND

0845 7660163

0208 5192122 (legal helpline)

www.mind.org.uk

MIND is a mental health charity working for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress.

National Domestic Violence helpline

0808 2000 247

NSPCC

0808 800 5000 (helpline)

www.nspcc.org.uk

This 24-hour helpline provides information, advice and counselling to anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse.

One Law for All

0800 046 7303

www.onelawforall.org.uk

The One Law for All advice help line provides general and legal advice against decisions made by Sharia or other religious tribunals and councils in Britain and suggests referrals.

Respond

0808 808 0700 (helpline)

www.respond.org.uk

Respond provides a range of services to victims of sexual abuse who have learning disabilities and those who have been affected by other trauma.

Reunite International Child Abduction Centre

0116 2555345 (admin line)

0116 2556234 (advice line)

www.reunite.org

Reunite specialises in international parental child abduction. It operates a 24-hour advice line providing advice, support and information to parents, family members and guardians who have had a child abducted or who fear abduction.

Samaritans

08457 90 90 90

www.samaritans.org

This is a 24-hour helpline providing confidential support to any person in emotional distress.

Shelterline

0808 800 4444

www.shelter.org.uk

This service provides emergency access to refuge services.

Southall Black Sisters

020 8571 9595

www.southallblacksisters.org.uk

This is a resource centre offering information, advice, advocacy, practical help, counselling, and support to women experiencing domestic abuse.

Victim Support

0845 30 30 900

www.victimsupport.org

Victim Support offers information and support to victims of crime, whether or not they have reported the crime to the police.

Voice UK

0845 122 8695

www.voiceuk.org.uk

Voice UK is a national charity supporting people with learning disabilities and other vulnerable people who have experienced crime or abuse.

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