

Letters

MP's call to ban cousin marriage is prejudiced

Dr Qurratul-Ain Rehman points to the low absolute risk of birth defects in children born to consanguineous parents in response to Richard Holden's bill



📷 'Richard Holden fails to mention that cousin marriage was once a common practice among the British aristocracy.' Photograph: Getty/iStockphoto

I find it intriguing that a Conservative former minister, Richard Holden, has [called for first-cousin marriage to be banned in the UK](#). He argues that the practice threatens women's freedom and leads to birth defects. Medical evidence shows that while the risk of birth defects is relatively higher among children born to consanguineous parents, the absolute risk remains low. In fact, the absolute risk increase is comparable to factors such as older maternal age, obesity and smoking - but there are no calls to ban them.

As a GP working at the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability in London, I manage patients with genetic disorders ranging from Down's syndrome to rare mitochondrial and genetic diseases. None of my patients were born of consanguineous parents.

I would also like to point out the historical inconsistency in the values being defended - Holden fails to mention that cousin marriage was once a common practice among the British aristocracy. I feel that grouping the whole Pakistani community as being subject to a "[clan mentality](#)" demeans them and highlights Holden's intolerance.

As an elected member of parliament, Holden has a responsibility to bring communities together rather than alienating any on grounds of prejudice and intolerance. I wish he would focus on more pressing issues, both domestic and international.

Dr Qurratul-Ain Rehman
New Malden, London

Stigma surrounding cousin marriages

Regarding Matthew Syed's report on cousin marriages (Dec 15; letters, Dec 22), the argument one must balance is that of autonomy versus health risks. Many life choices have a negative effect on one's health and on pregnancy. If we are to curb people's choices over perceived health risks, it follows that we must extend such restrictions to other life choices such as smoking and drinking alcohol. For those genuinely concerned about risks associated with consanguinity the key is education, so that individuals who choose to marry a cousin do so knowing all the facts. An outright ban that curbs freedom would only fuel the stigma around consanguinity.

Dr Maleeha Mansur
London SW20

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parents, the absolute risk remains low. In fact the absolute risk increase is comparable to factors such as older maternal age, obesity and smoking – but there are no calls to ban them.

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Dr Qurratul-Ain Rehman
New Malden, Surrey

European royal families married cousins to secure alliances and preserve power. Yet today cousin marriage among Muslims is vilified. In reality cousin marriages often strengthen familial bonds and ensure economic stability.

Syedah Nasir
London TW5



Why ban first-cousin marriage but not alcohol?

I write in response to the recent debate regarding MP Richard Holden's proposal to ban cousin marriages, citing health risks associated with **consanguinity** ("**MP speaks out in Parliament against ban on marrying cousins**", Tuesday 10 December).

Particularly in Bradford, which has a significant Pakistani Muslim community, concerns about consanguinity were highlighted in a 2019 report indicating that it contributes to **child abnormalities**. Yet it neglected to mention that the **risk from cousin marriages** is comparable to that of advanced maternal age.

Consanguinity, practised by up to 10 per cent of the global population, is deeply entrenched in **cultural and historical traditions**. Risks of birth defects are more significantly influenced by unhealthy lifestyles, and very costly to the NHS. Yet no outright bans exist on smoking or alcohol consumption, which are harmful to reproductive outcomes.

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Dr Amtul Bhunnoo

Roehampton, London





Ban on first-cousin marriages just Muslim bashing

The recent push to criminalise first-cousin marriage (“**MP speaks out in Parliament against ban on marrying cousins**” – Tuesday 10 December) risks alienating communities from one another at a time when we should be seeking out unity and commonality.

It isn’t lost on me that the narrative Conservative MP Richard Holden **presented in his proposal** to ban first-cousin marriages was one in which “diaspora communities”, particularly Muslim communities, are defying long-held “national values”, engaging in a practice which impinges on the “freedom of women”.

MP Robert Jenrick, shadow justice secretary, further insisted that the practice of cousin marriages is “medieval”. These are funny claims, given that our “national values” were arguably composed by a British aristocracy who, long after the medieval ages, married their cousins.

One must question why the conversation is being brought up now, when the rate of cousin marriages among Pakistani communities in Bradford has fallen sharply in the last ten years. It seems another way to negatively bring Muslims into the national conversation, pushing false, racist stereotypes that Muslims are backwards, misogynistic and un-British.

Elected officials have a responsibility not to validate such harmful views. This summer, we saw how politicians doing so helped to embolden the **far-right to riot in the streets**, intimidating black and brown people and insisting that Muslims are not welcome in this country.

It seems to me this is a far more dangerous and immediate threat to the safety of Muslim women, and indeed men, than cousin marriages have ever been.

RECOMMENDED



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Cousin marriages: the case against a ban

Health

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THE recent Commons motion tabled to ban first-cousin marriages has sparked a meaningless debate that has very little scientific integrity.

It is not difficult to frame statistics as exaggerations. The consensus is that the risk of birth defects to children born as a result of consanguineous relations is minimal,

and that other factors such as the mother's age and poor diet can have similar effects. My point is, if we begin to curtail liberties based on biases (and let's be honest, there is a racial bias at play here), where do we stop? Will we tell all women over the age of 35 they are not allowed to have children? Of course not, that would be ridiculous.

Surely as a country we have far more important things to concern us.

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IFFAT MIRZA RASHID, Bentley, Hants IN A country where a little over half the babies are born out of wedlock and marriage is declining, solid justification is needed for any ban on first-cousin marriages such as Richard Holden MP proposes, which I struggle to find.

If this is really about safeguarding the next generation, perhaps we should target other factors such as smoking and alcohol too. Rather, it seems to target diaspora communities where cousin marriage is more commonplace. That is not to deny the potential risks, but the numbers do not suggest a ban is needed on a practice that most religions permit. It should be a matter of informed choice.

ARFA YASSIR, Swindon, Wilts

THE arguments one must balance in regard to cousin marriages are those of our autonomy versus the health risks. Many life choices have a clear negative correlation to health and pregnancy. As a free society, if we are to curb people's relationship choices, we ought logically to extend the diktat to other life choices that can adversely influence health, such as smoking. For those truly concerned about the risks associated with consanguinity, the key is education. Individuals who choose to marry a cousin would then do so knowing those risks. An outright ban would curb freedom and serve only to fuel stigma.

Dr MALEEHA MANSUR, London SW20