

FAITHFUL  
AND  
FULLY FLOURISHING

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## Introduction

I have tried to live as a Muslim since I was 19 years old. Back then, I did not know that there were different Islams: the many versions that are generally practiced and the one described in the Quran. Since reading the Quran was not generally practiced, I learned everything from catechism books written by Islamic “experts” (as almost everyone does). I started full-time fasting during Ramadan (I used to fast only a couple of days), then came the praying. Praying five times a day, especially the morning prayer which should be performed before the sun rises, was not easy. Although I set my alarm, I usually missed morning prayers. But as time passed, I got used to waking early and routinely completed the five times requirement.

The next step was covering my head. That was hard. Until that, my newfound Islamic practices were not visible. No one could have separated me and my beliefs and lifestyle from the other women around me. I was invisible in a way. But when I covered my head I became visible. By “announcing” that I was a Muslim, I had to live like a Muslim, which to me meant living according to the rules written in the catechism books.

As a result of my “becoming Muslim” journey, I had to give up many things I had done growing up. I stopped going to restaurants that served alcohol (which meant almost all restaurants), avoided shaking hands with men, did not look in the eye of strange men when talking to them, and spoke to men as little as possible. I started taking baths with my underwear on so that angels would not see me naked, and buried my fallen hair in the soil so men could not see my hair. I don’t remember how many times I had to leave the elevator before my intended floor because it was not permitted for a Muslim woman to be alone in an enclosed space with a strange man. My fingers bled many times due to scratching them so hard to remove pen stains because I was told that water does not penetrate through pen ink, so my ablution, ritual cleansing, would not be complete. I even considered removing the implant on my tooth because I believed it prevented water from reaching every corner of my mouth.

I was prepared to be fully obedient to my future husband because I believed that if I did not, the angels would curse me all night long; I had to please him to get my visa for Heaven! Women, we believed, had no choice but to obey their husbands if I wanted Heaven. I even accepted that it would be ok for him to beat me if I displeased him. I accepted all of these things because it said so in the catechisms. Although my life was becoming increasingly miserable, I thought I was doing precisely what God wanted me to do; so I accepted my miserable life without question or grumbling.

Years later when I read the Quran, I began to understand what GOD says that God wants for his followers—which is the opposite of the catechetical Muslim image of the woman who obeys without questioning (and should be hidden and silenced and, if displeasing, beaten). I started questioning my own life. I wondered, given the Quran’s clear and liberating teachings, where all of those hideous requirements came from? Who decided that Muslim women must live isolated and hidden lives? Why must women obey their husbands upon pain of beating? And why should Muslim women live as if they do not exist?

In this book, I will tell of my painful journey from catechism-book-Muslim to Quran-Muslim. My catechism-book-Muslim life was painful because I felt compelled to believe in a God who wanted to diminish and harden the lives of women (but who wanted an earthly Heaven for men). But after reading

the Quran, I came to understand that the catechism-book-Muslim requirements for women are nothing but interpretations and impositions of male, misogynist “experts” (they are not God’s requirements).

I came to see that God does not want women to live shadowy and silent lives under the authority and even fist of their male relatives or husbands. God wants everyone—men and women alike—to be independent individuals who use their reason to decide for themselves how to live their own lives with their own free will: Say, "Let everyone act in their own way. Your Lord is fully aware of who is best guided to the path" (Quran 17:84). It’s also been a painful journey because rejecting the image and life of the catechism-book-Muslim woman and embracing the image of the Quran-Muslim women was really hard. Men who accept catechism-book-Islam continue to seek to marginalize, silence, and denigrate me.

God does not want women to be puppets, God wants women to be puppet-masters. But this can be understood and realized only if the Quran is on the table; if not, catechism-book-Islam will continue to bury women alive.

As I said before, I suffered during my catechism-book-Muslim life because the things that I believed were expected of me were against my nature. But an All-Loving God would not want me to do things against my nature. After all, God is the One Who created me, with my nature, and with the desire that I fully flourish both in this life and in the next life. So I decided to write this book, to help women who suffer as I did, who will suffer as I did.

## Chapter 1

### Hearing the Cries of Islam's Oppressed Women

#### The Cries of Oppressed Women

Everywhere I go Muslim women, young and old, whisper heartbreaking stories to me about their difficulties being a woman in a Muslim-majority country. I've heard from the battered Egyptian woman whose father, uncle and then brother slammed her head in a heavy wooden door when she stopped wearing hijab; she is grateful to them for not killing her. I've heard from the disheartened and terrified teacher who was accused of being an atheist because she was exploring the possibility that God creates through evolutionary processes; her father, in front of eight local imams, told her that he'd kill her if she continue talking about evolution; surrounded by nine threatening men, she meekly complied. I recall the desperate wife whose husband beats her daily because he thinks the Quran condones and even commends wife-beating. And I remember the recent college graduate who, after receiving a full scholarship to study for a PHD in Germany, was told that her brother would kill her if she left the country (unless she married a man first and he agreed to let her travel); she faces the tragic situation of marrying a man of her father's and brother's choosing, and hoping he'll let her study abroad. And I read in the paper of honor murders, of the stoning of adulterers (always female), of female genital mutilation, and of women confined inside their clothing and home. All in the name of Islam.

Women whisper stories to me in strictest confidence because they feel they cannot trust their fathers or brothers, for sure, and even their mothers. They feel they can't trust friends. Certainly not religious leaders. Their very real and palpable fear is often, ultimately, for their very lives.

Opressive Muslims, in the name of Islam, are destroying true faith in women. Are, literally, destroying women.

Little wonder that I also hear of women's disinterest in and hatred of Islam and even of their thoughts of suicide.

I was a victim of that oppression. As a young girl, when I decided to seriously practice Islam, I convinced myself that God wanted me to live a contained and constrained life within my home. Although I could meet my girlfriends at home, I thought that I should be excluded from everyday life and men (except for the men in my immediate family). I even considered quitting my university education because I had to study with male students and professors; I determined to become an "obedient wife" instead. I had already accepted that God had permitted husbands to beat disobedient wives. And I came to believe, even as a successful student, that I lacked the capacity, like all women, to do the things that men can do. In short, I gladly accepted my invisibility.

I mistakenly believed that total submission to men comes from total submission to God. I had started to think that if this is what God wants me to do, I will do it no matter what to gain His approval: whatever God wants, I will do.

But then I read the Quran.

God wants Muslims to base their beliefs and practices ultimately on the Quran, God's final and definitive revelation to the Prophet. And in the Quran, I read that God does not want blind submission, rather God wants submission formed by questioning and thinking.

So I started a new life directed by the Quran. I continued my education at the American University D.C. in the United States, then earned my MA and Ph.D. degrees at Istanbul University in Political Science. And twenty-one years ago, I started working as Director of a major construction and shipping business in Turkey, making me a working woman in a field full of men in a Muslim-majority country.

Since Turkey does not enforce *sharia* law, Turkish women have easier lives than Muslim women in other countries that do—Turkish women can drive, wear blue jeans, and keep their hair/head uncovered. We are allowed full admission to the public square, can be educated at the highest levels, and can attain the highest occupations and government positions in the land.

Yet Turkey maintains remnants of Islam-endorsed mistreatment of women; there are people—women and men alike—who believe that women are deficient compared to men. It can be exhausting to compete and live in such a male-dominated world. Many Turkish women have failure to thrive.

Life is much worse for women in other Muslim-majority countries that enshrine *sharia* law like Saudi Arabia, for example, or Afghanistan. So I am not alone.

I recently asked a group of young women in one of those Muslim-majority countries about their religious beliefs and practices, including how many times a day they prayed. I told them I was writing this book and asked about the difficulties they face in their country. All of them said, out loud, in front of their best friends, that everything was really great in their country. They were great, they exclaimed. No worries.

Later, one of them sent me a very private and poignant email:

*Dear Feryal,  
I hope you're enjoying your trip.  
About what we were talking at dinner,  
Why most of us do not pray?  
We (females) grow up ashamed of our gender.  
We start our lives listening to words like "Do not speak," "You must be home within twenty minutes after the end of your classes/work," "You cannot go out at night unless accompanied by one of your brothers," "You can no longer go to school, you are an adult now so you must get married and start having a family," and many more statements only because we are girls.  
I know girls who could not go to school because they got their period.  
I know girls who were forced to be married.  
I know girls who got beaten because they talked to boys.  
Being a girl here means you have to stay in the box that other people made for you just to stay alive.  
It means not sleeping for days when you hear about an "honor crime," knowing that you could be that victim anytime.  
and it is all in the name of Islam  
We (girls) grow up hating how Islam discriminates against us, questioning every belief we have.  
We start looking for answers,  
But then we get stuck in an endless, inescapable loop.  
Most of us get depressed, become atheists, or get lost in big sins,  
Just to prove a point that we have a bigger purpose than obeying men and having their children.  
But we do not get to choose; we are not allowed to make any choices, like travel or live in our own house.*

*A girl can spend her life dreaming about and despairing of things that will never happen.  
Many girls can not see this as a problem because they are programmed to think of themselves as less than men.  
Rich girls, who often can make choices, ignore the problem  
And then there's us—those who suffer without hope trying to be treated as a complete human.  
It is a long e-mail. I sent it maybe because telling you the problems we suffer is a part of the solution.  
Thanks for listening.*

In the name of Islam, women are physically harmed, psychologically damaged, sociologically isolated and economically disadvantaged. And driven to despair and away from true faith. In the name of Allah and by the authority of the Prophet, it must stop.

In this book, I will show that the Quran, in a single powerful voice, affirms the full and equal flourishing of women, the full and equal rights of women, and the full and equal voice of women. So the women-denigrating and women-silencing burdens imposed on Muslim women as religious duties are incompatible with Islam properly understood. While Muslims, mostly men, have instrumentalized and weaponized the tradition to oppress and exploit women, the Quran stands clearly opposed to such injustices and abuses.

### **The Quran to the Rescue**

Ironically and sadly, as a “traditional Muslim woman” who did not think for herself and did not read the Quran, I once contributed to that world. In the beginning, as a Muslim woman who started reading the Quran and thinking deeply about its verses. I heard, loud and clear, God’s astonishing and refreshing and liberating message of equality and flourishing for women in the Quran. For those who are not familiar with Islam and the Quran, I will briefly introduce the Quran and the other texts that have informed Islamic thought.

*Muhammad and the Quran.* Islam was revealed in the Arabian Peninsula to the Prophet Muhammad (570-632) through Archangel Gabriel over a period of 23 years beginning in 610, concluding with the death of the Prophet in 632. Islam affirms God’s revelation to a host of prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus. The Quran, Islam’s holy book, is the last book to be revealed, and thus, Muhammad is the last of the Prophets.

The word “Quran” means “recitation,” and from the first day of its revelation, the Quran has been recited: the Quran was/is read, memorized and copied, enabling us to have the earliest copies unchanged. After the Prophet passed away, the Quran was written down and memorized by hundreds of people, preserving the text and keeping the order of the chapters (*surahs*) in the same arrangement since the days of the Prophet. So Muslims around the world read the same, unchanged Quran. Although it has been almost 1400 years since the Prophet’s revelation and although there have been many different sects and disputes in Islam, Muslims agree about the Quran, Islam’s founding and foundational text.

When Muslims pray every day, they recite precisely the same lines, verses from the Quran, all over the World. For example, in the morning prayer, all the Muslims recite:

All praise is to God alone, the Lord of all the worlds,  
The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful,  
Lord of the Day of Judgement!  
You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help.  
Guide us to the straight way;  
The way of those whom You blessed;  
not of those who have deserved wrath, nor of the strayers. (Quran 1:1-7)

1.5 billion Muslims recite this passage of the Quran in every prayer every day.

*The Authority of the Quran.* In the Quran, God makes three important proclamations about the Quran. First, *God will preserve the Quran*: “We, indeed We, it is We who have sent down the Reminder, and indeed it is We who will preserve it.” (Quran 15:9) (note, “We” is a common name for God in the Quran). Second, *the Quran is complete*: “We did not leave anything out of this book.” (Quran 6:38); And, third, *the Quran is fully detailed*: “We have given them a scripture that is fully detailed, with knowledge, guidance, and mercy for the people who believe.” (Quran 7:52) Everything a devoted Muslim needs—requirements, provisions, and the prohibitions—is included in the Quran in detail; nothing needed has been left out. Finally, and most importantly, *the Quran has supreme authority on Islamic belief and practice*.

Muslims believe, then, that God had guaranteed, for all times and in all places, a complete, fully detailed and authoritative text. One might think then, and many Muslims do, that Muslims neither have no need of any post-Quranic sources of information. Finally, Muslims believe that all matters of faith and practice must ultimately be based on the Quran. Therefore, and this should go without saying, issues affecting women—obligations, bans, and beliefs—should also be determined by the Quran and only the Quran.

*Quranic Silence.* Issues on which the Quran is silent—which we call “*conscious silence*”—are or should be left to the discretion and conscience of the individual believer (unlike the obligations like fasting during the month of Ramadan or daily prayers which are clearly explained in the Quran). However, the Quran provides few details regarding the daily lives of Muslims, such as what to wear, how to educate children, what sort of car one should buy, or how to decorate one’s home. The Quran’s silence, which we call *conscious silence*, on such issues was intentional. It leaves the initiative to Muslims to determine their proper application in their own contexts and time.

Of course, the Quran offers general principles such as being just, seeking peace, and not cheating others. The Quran’s conscious silence on those more specific issues permits Muslims to adapt the Quran to the 7<sup>th</sup> and to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, to republics as well as to kingdoms, to 8th c. nomadic tribal tents as well as to high-rise apartments in modern cities, to traditional dress as well as to blue jeans, etc.—*without contradicting the principles of the Quran*. Since the Quran does not favor a republic over a monarchy (although it does provide general principles of governance such as justice and merit-based appointments), jeans over lederhosen, or tents over skyscrapers, Muslims can and should adapt the Quran’s more general principles to different types of governments, garments and cultures without. Whether kingdom or republic, the rulers must exercise wisdom and justice; whether jeans or lederhosen, clothing should preserve one’s modesty, and domiciles should provide safety and home and hospitality. Etc. and Etc.

Consider a Muslim decorating his or her house. Since the Quran is silent on interior design, Muslims can freely choose to decorate their homes either with a vintage sofa or a contemporary chair; their walls can be painted white or chartreuse; and they can choose Turkish rugs or none at all for their floors.

Simply put: if something is not mentioned in the Quran, each Muslim to freely decide.

Of course, some theologians (all men) *have* spoken on matters on which the Quran has kept silent, claiming Islamic support for the oppression of women, suicide bombings of innocents, the killing of fellow Muslims, and the curative effects of eating the wing of a fly. If the Quran is authoritative, complete, and fully detailed, how did commandments and proscriptions *not included in* the Quran come to so dramatically “re-shape” Islam? More problematically, given the authority of the Quran for Muslims, how did provisions that *contradict* the Quran come to define Islam?

Finally, claims about Islam on which the Quran is silent often negatively impact the lives of women. Again, some are just silly. Fatwas, for example, prohibit women from watching soccer matches (those male thighs!), and eating a banana or a cucumber (Freud would have had a field day). More seriously, non-Quranic fatwas have excluded women from education and from working with or near men; many restrict women to the home. As such, these fatwas have prevented women from entering into the public square, enslaving them to their husbands, and requiring them to live invisible lives.

## Hadith

Although the Quran was the only written religious source during the time of the Prophet, immediately after his death, things allegedly done and said by him were reported by his followers. Over several generations *hadiths*—alleged reports of the sayings and actions of the Prophet—were collected and compiled and argued over, taking final form two or three centuries after the death of the Prophet. The *Hadith* came to be treated almost as sacred as the Quran, forming the authoritative backbone of Islamic life and jurisprudence.

A note of caution concerning hadiths: the Prophet, the final Prophet, did not write any hadiths. Moreover, he forbade others from writing hadiths and destroyed those that had been written. After the death of the Prophet, the first caliph, Abu Bakr, assembled the people and told them:

You are recounting various hadiths from God’s Messenger. Because of this, future generations will find themselves in even bigger disagreements. Do not recount any hadiths from God’s Messenger. To those asking you to recount hadiths tell them: God’s Book is with us, do what it permits, and do not what it forbids.<sup>1</sup>

The second caliph, Umar, was even stricter. Fearing the upsurge in hadith writing during his caliphate, he commanded the burning of all of the hadith collections.<sup>2</sup> The third caliph, Uthman, threatened Abu Hurairah and Kab, who claimed many hadiths, with exile.<sup>3</sup> The fourth caliph, Ali, wrote: “Those who have hadith

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<sup>1</sup> Zehebi, *Tezkiretū’l-huffaz*, 1, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Sa’d, *et-Tabakatū’l-kübra*, V, 143.

<sup>3</sup> Ramehürmüzi, *el-Muhaddisü’l-fasil*, 544; Suyuti, *Tahziru’l-havas*, 156-157.

pages in their possessions should destroy them because following the hadiths would ruin people.”<sup>4</sup> Anticipating the damage that fabricated hadiths could wreak on genuine Islam, *on the authority of the final revelation to the final Prophet*, those closest to the Prophet vehemently opposed their transcription.

But the writing and distribution of hadith persisted.

As you can imagine, after two or three hundred years (when the hadiths were collected and formalized), it was simply impossible to determine which of the hadiths were true and which were fabricated. Moreover, by then, Christian, Jewish, and other converts to Islam had incorporated their own beliefs, cultures, legends, rituals, and traditions into Islam in the form of “hadith.” Some hadiths were even fabricated to damage Islam; many were developed for political reasons (countless hadiths were fabricated by those with political and economic power to ensure their own advantage).

By attributing the hadith to the Prophet, these “saying”—nefarious or benign—gained acceptance as part of Islam.

In violation of the claim of the Prophet receiving the final revelation, hadiths are often claimed to be revealed by God; many equate the Hadith with verses of the Quran, taking the Hadith as sacred, reliable reports of the Prophet’s words and deeds. Some even claim that the Hadith can abrogate the verses of the Quran. So hadiths violate both the authority and the completeness of Quran: Hadith (i) fabricate commandments or proscriptions that are not in the Quran, and (ii) fabricate commandments or proscriptions that contradict the Quran.

Here are several examples of the problem of fabricated hadiths:

- The Prophet said "If a house fly falls in the drink of anyone of you, he should dip it (in the drink) and take it out, for one of its wings has a disease and the other has the cure for the disease."
- The Prophet said "Once Solomon, son of David said, 'Tonight I will have sexual intercourse with one hundred (or ninety-nine) women each of whom will give birth to a knight who will fight in God's Cause.' On that, his friend told him "Say if God wills it" but Solomon did not. Therefore none of the women got pregnant except one who gave birth to a crippled boy. And the Prophet Muhammed said if Solomon had said, "God willing", he would have begotten sons all of whom would have been knights striving in God's Cause."
- The climate of Medina did not suit some people, so the Prophet ordered them to follow his shepherd, i.e. his camels, and drink their milk and urine (as a medicine). So they followed the shepherd with the camels and drank their milk and urine till their bodies became healthy.

There are, of course, no health benefits from eating fly wings. And while men might marvel that Solomon had sex with 100 women in one night, there is little scientific evidence to support the claim that saying, “Allah willing” during intercourse will guarantee the birth of a boy (a future knight even!). Finally, the medicinal benefits of drinking camel urine have been greatly exaggerated. Yet no end of ink has been spilled by Hadith scholars seeking to rationalize the health benefits of that one fly wing and drinking camel urine.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn Ebi Şeybe, *el-Musannef*, V, 314; Ibn Abdilberr, *Cami’u beyani’l-’ilmi ve fazlih*, I, 271.

*Hadith transmission.* Although many allege to be experts in separating the hadith wheat from the fabricated chaff, it is impossible to determine which of the hadiths transcribed hundreds of years after the Prophet are true and which are false (which are authentic and which are fabricated).

A host of psychological studies carried out during the past century demonstrates that narratives transmitted orally end up distorted, even over brief time periods. For example, Ulric Neisser and Nicole Harsh asked a group of people with whom and where they were when they heard about the explosion and what they were doing at the moment the space shuttle Challenger exploded. Two and a half years later, they asked the same questions to the same individuals. Only 3 out of 7 gave the same answers they did two and a half years prior. But when asked how confident they were in the correctness of their answers, everyone reported 5 out of 5. The majority of the answers given just *two and a half years* after the incident differed from the original responses, yet each respondent was certain that their answers were identical!

If such grave errors can be made in such a short run, how dependable are statements allegedly transmitted orally over several centuries? Since the Hadith was compiled hundreds of years after the Prophet, there must have been a chain of five or six generations between the time of the Prophet and the editors of the Hadith. How can one reasonably decide if something is trustworthy based on such lengthy transmission-chains beginning with long-dead people?<sup>5</sup>

For the sake of this book, we will focus on the fabricated Hadiths concerning women that contradict the Quran. Muslims simply cannot accept any claims about the Prophet—about Islamic faith and practice—that contradict the Quran. For faithful Muslims, the authority of the Quran is final and decisive.

### **Hadith and women**

The Quran affirms that all Muslims, male or female, are created equal. Whatever is expected of a male Muslim, the same is expected of a female.

Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, men who guard their chastity, women who guard their chastity, men who remember God frequently and women who remember God frequently- God has prepared for them a pardon and an immense reward. (Quran 33:35)

And the believers will be judged and rewarded or punished according to their deeds only, gender is irrelevant.

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<sup>5</sup> The number of hadiths that were written down at the time of the Prophet and then used by their compilers are very small in the proportion of the total number of hadiths. Compilers of hadiths sought to determine the *trustworthiness of the people transmitting them* (a method called *cerh-tadil*). But, you might imagine, just as it is difficult to verify the contents, it is also difficult to determine if a person is trustworthy (or even if the alleged person was really the source of the hadith). Indeed, there are cases in which one hadith compiler accepts and another rejects the trustworthiness of the same hadith narrator. Although widely practiced, it is impossible today to decisively eliminate fabricated hadiths through the *cerh-tadil* method.

I will not waste the work of any worker among you, whether male or female. You are one of another. (Quran 3:195)

However, many Muslims adopted practices that belittled women such as the sequestering of women within their homes and the belief that the primary duty of women is to obey the commands of men. Such misogyny infiltrated Islam through hadiths in the form of “the Prophet said/did that...” that falsely attribute misogynistic beliefs/practices to the Prophet. By the third century of Islam, when most of the hadith books were compiled, this female-belittling, female-denigrating culture had been widely accepted as Islam.

For example, a Hadith claims that the Prophet married Aisha when she was just six-years-old and that he had intercourse with her when she was just nine-years-old. Following the Prophet’s “model,” some subsequent Muslims have endorsed pedophilia.

The status of adult women is not much better. For example, some hadiths assert that women are forbidden from going anywhere without their husbands’ permission. Others insist that a woman can visit her parents only when permitted by her husband (though the Quran exhorts believers to assist their parents). Some Hadiths assert that if a woman refuses to go to “sleep” with her husband, angels will curse her. Others claim that a woman’s entry into Paradise is contingent on her obedience to her husband.

By appealing to misogynistic hadiths, theologians present their misogyny as universal religious truth, offering interpretations that contradict the Quran. Such vicious non-Quranic insertions, either on matters of conscious silence or in contradiction to the Quran, say less about the Quran and more about the (usually male) theologian’s attempt to create a religion that favors the political elite (usually men) or their own desires (the desires of men).

The founders of canonical law schools, the writers of hadith books, the founders of the most major sects, and the writers of Quran interpretations are historically all men. These men have filled in the Quran’s conscious silences with hadiths that favor men. Since the Quran maintains a conscious silence on most husband-wife relations, the details should be left to each couple to decide. However, self-proclaimed authorities (men) speak into the silence, always in favor of men.

Although there were some female theologians in the first years of Islam, women were quickly excluded from social life. Consequently, women were denied access to an education. As a result, Islamic scholars in such sciences as interpretation, canonical law, hadiths, and *kalam* were exclusively male. As one might expect, male-elevating theologies and practices reigned supreme. Their judgments concerning women were shaped not by the Quran but by how *they, men*, viewed women within their patriarchal societies and cultures.

Male subordination of women is particularly visible within the institution of marriage. Experts in canonical law have reduced marriage to a sales contract, in which a woman is offered for sale to a man, the “buyer.” Consider how a 13<sup>th</sup> century scholar describes marriage: “Marriage is a contract, the object of which is domination of the vagina.”<sup>6</sup> A 14<sup>th</sup> century scholar wrote that when a woman gets married,

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<sup>6</sup> Muhaqqiq Hilli, *Sharay’ al-Islam*, 428; quoted by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, in *Towards Gender Equality: Muslim Family Laws and Shariah*, p.29.

she sells her genital organs in exchange for marriage.<sup>7</sup> al-Ghazali(1058-1111), one of Islam’s most prominent and influential theologians, compared women in marriage to female slaves, whose sexual services were reserved for their husbands; he wrote that a woman should obey her husband and should not go outside her home: “It is enough to say that marriage is a kind of slavery where a woman is her husband’s slave. She is bound to obey her husband and fulfill his every wish that is not sinful... The Prophet has stated that a woman who has won the approval of her husband will go to paradise.”<sup>8</sup> Throughout Islamic history, the sale of a woman to her man and total obedience to husband-owner (as one might think a recently purchased slave owes his master) have been presented as a religious duty.

### **Misinterpretations of the Quran**

Apart from fabricated misogynistic hadiths, male-dominated and male-oriented interpreters of the Quran provided additional sources of discriminating against women. As I will show in the coming pages, by interpreting or translating Arabic words in ways that endorse the enslavement of women to their husbands, these men (*ulama*) presented Islam as a misogynistic religion in which a decent life is impossible for women. And if that is not enough, they describe a heaven where men are rewarded with 70 virgins but women are eternally wedded to the men who made their earthly lives miserable. Perpetuating injustice from the here-and-now into eternity violates the Quran’s clear teachings on justice.

### **The argument of the book**

Male-created, male-dominated “Islam” holds that women are slaves of men and that husbands have the right to beat their slave-wives. Moreover, I was only too eager, out of my misplaced understanding of submission to God, to submit myself to my husband. I was held captive by these views and the limited life they offered me.

Again: reading the Quran liberated me.

In each of the following chapters, I will first present the Quran’s glorious vision of inclusion and flourishing women, and second, reveal the roots of the “Islamic” mistreatment and miscalculation of women. I will, then, reject such religion-infused misogyny by showing their inconsistency with the clear teachings of the Prophet.

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<sup>7</sup> F. H. Ruxton, *Maliki Law*, 106; quoted by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Towards Gender Equality: Muslim Family Laws and Shariah*, p.29.

<sup>8</sup> Imam Ghazali, *The Proper Conduct of Marriage in Islam* (Adab an-Nikah), p.89; quoted by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Towards Gender Equality: Muslim Family Laws and Shariah*, p.30.

## Chapter 2

### Creation

My grandmother was a devoted Muslim: she prayed, fasted, never lied (as far as I know!), helped the needy, and she was just and merciful to everyone. She married my grandfather when she was 16 (my grandfather was 35). She was a loyal wife. She never worked outside of her home. All she did, throughout her entire life, was take care of her children (she had 6) and keep her house tidy. She fed them three times a day, cleaned, washed, ironed, and went to bed around 10 o'clock every night after serving the dinner and cleaning up the kitchen. She never left home without telling my grandfather. Every day, after cleaning the home and just before lunch, she went to her next-door neighbor's, whose life was similar to hers, for a cup of Turkish coffee. As far as I can remember, that was her only time for herself. She never disobeyed my grandfather (who was a polite and decent man) and he was never rude to her. But since he was the head of the family, my grandfather's requests were law; they had to be followed. No surprise, then, that she called him "master" instead of calling him by his name. Even though they loved and respected each other, this was their relationship.

I asked my grandmother why she always tried to please my grandfather. She told me of a saying that she learned from her mother: "Woman was created from man to serve man." Her God-given vocation, she thought, was to make life easier for her husband.

The Quran, however, states that man and woman were created from the same stuff (*nafs wahida*) or species without favoring either gender. So we read in Quran 7.189: "It is He who created you [all humanity] from one kind (*nafs wahida*), and created from it (*nafs wahida*) its mate..." Moreover, each person was created, without exception or regard for gender, with the express purpose of loving and serving God.

In the pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian traditions that surrounded the Prophet, they heard: "woman was created from and for man" (so a woman's duty is to secure her spouse's happiness), and "it was Eve's fault that Adam (man) sinned" (so women are primarily responsible for and the sources of

evil). Moreover, many pre-Islamic cultures also claimed that women had to be controlled because they are the “source of all evil.” As a result, women were treated as second-class beings with the devious potential to divert men from the true path.

Although these woman-denigrating claims are not found in the Quran, they quickly infiltrated Islam, restricting women and transforming them into veritable slaves of men. How, without any Quranic support whatsoever, did Muslims come to adopt such woman-denigrating beliefs?

### Creation of Woman

Creation narratives often shape perceptions of females. For example, the Jewish and Christian narrative that Eve was created from Adam’s rib supported (rightly or wrongly) belief in the deficiency of women due to their allegedly lower ontological status; because of this “deficiency,” women required male tutelage. For example, in the New Testament, we read:

Man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man (I Cor 11:8-9).<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, this narrative and its misogynistic consequences (again, right or wrong) negatively influenced Islamic thought as well.

Does such a woman-from-man narrative accord with Islam?

Since the Quran is the ultimate source of Islam, any belief contrary to the Quran is wrong. And the Quran does not claim that woman was created from man. It states, instead, that man and woman are created from the same stuff (*nafs wahida*). So, the Quran is clear—woman was *not* created *from* man (and so *not* created *for* men).

Yet the belief that woman was created from man found its way into “Islam” through fabricated hadiths. In the Hadith we find narratives of woman’s creation from man:

- “Treat women well, because woman was created from a rib. The most crooked part of a rib is its upper part. If you try to straighten it up, you will break it; if you let it be, it will always be crooked. Then treat women well.”<sup>10</sup>
- “God created Eve from Adam’s rib.”<sup>11</sup>
- “In other words, he created his wife Eve from the same kind. he created Eve from his rib for sure.”<sup>12</sup>
- Adam was placed in Paradise. He wandered about by himself without a companion with whom he could find consolation. It happened that upon waking up after having fallen asleep, he saw another creature beside him of his kind. “Who are you?” he asked. “A woman,” she said. He asked her the reason for her creation. The woman said, “I have been created to comfort you.”

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<sup>9</sup> See also Genesis, 2:18-24.

<sup>10</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, “Enbiya”, 1, “Nikah”, 80; Sahih Muslim, “Rada”, 59,60,65; Jami` at-Tirmidhi, “Talak, 12; /bn Majah, “Taharet”, 77; Darimi, “Nikah”, 35; Ahmed b. Hanbel, al-Musnad, XV, 321, 494, XVI, 276, 499.

<sup>11</sup> Firuzabadi, *Tenviru’l-mikbas min tefsiri Ibn Abbas*, 485.

<sup>12</sup> Taberi, *Tefsiru’t-Taberi*, XVIII, 478.

When angels asked Adam about the woman, he said that he had named her Eve because she had been created out of a living creature.<sup>13</sup>

Not only does the Quran not claim that Eve was created from Adam, Eve is not mentioned in the Quran at all!

Most fundamentally and importantly, *man and woman*—the Quran is clear—*are created from “the same stuff,”* not one from the other. So, according to the Quran, woman was not created from man. Moreover, the Quran, neither states nor implies that women are created *for* men. Rather, the Quran states that all people are created *for* God (Quran 51:56). The *woman-for-man* narratives hold that a woman’s primary purpose in life is to serve men, in general, and her man (husband), in particular: men, then, can and should rule women (who are of deficient stuff). Consequently, these beliefs have been used to rationalize women’s exclusion from leadership roles and decision-making positions within the family, the mosque, and society.

Yet, according to the Quran, neither woman nor man exist for each other; they exist—male and female alike—*for God*.

Although the belief that Eve was created from Adam’s rib is not in the Quran, it was taken into “Islam” by male scholars to create the impression that women are second-class creatures compared to men. Yet, as we shall see, the Quran states clearly that both woman and man have been created from the same stuff (*nafs wahida*).

### Origins of Humanity

Not only does the Quran not claim that woman was created from man, it expressly states that both man and woman have been created from the stuff (*nafs wahida*). In this section, we will explain what is meant by “creation from one stuff” (*nafs wahida*). Consider Quran 4.1:

O mankind! Be conscious of your Lord, who has created you out of one kind (*nafsi wahidatin*), and out of it (*minha*) created its mate (*zevceha*), and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women...

While “...who has created you out of one kind (*nafs wahida*), and out of it created its mate (*zevc*),” has been interpreted to mean Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib, there is no reference in the Quran to Eve’s creation from Adam. Moreover, being created from “one stuff” (*nafs wahida*) implies that both man and woman’s creation from the same “stuff.”

Other verses in which the word *nafs* (stuff) is used show that in the above-mentioned verse *nafs* means “species”:

From His signs is that He created for you mates out of your kind (*nafs<sup>14</sup>*) so that you may reside with them, and He placed between you affection and compassion. In that are signs for people who think! (Quran 30: 21)

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<sup>13</sup> Ibn Kesir, *Muhtasaru tefsiri Ibn Kesir*, I, 54

<sup>14</sup> Technically, the Arabic term in each of these three surahs is *enfusikum*, a derivative of *nafs*.

And God has given you mates of your kind (*nafs*) and has given you, through your mates, children, and grandchildren, and has provided you from the good provisions. Will men, then, [continue to] believe in things false and vain, and thus blaspheme against God's blessings? (Quran 16: 72)

Indeed, God bestowed a favor upon the believers by sending them a messenger from amongst themselves (*nafs*), reciting His signs, causing them to grow in purity, and imparting unto them the divine writ as well as wisdom – whereas before that they were indeed lost in error. (Quran 3: 164).

The expressions “your kind” and “themselves” in the above verses demonstrate that all of the mates (companions) and the prophets are of the same stuff (same species).

Since *nafs* means “species” in 4.1, we should reject the creation of woman from Adam. The expression “O Mankind” is addressed to all of humanity, not Adam, thus underlining God's creation of *all people* from *nafs wahida*. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to the “creation of woman from man.”<sup>15</sup>

*nafs wahida*, which is found in five verses of the Quran, never refers to Adam. For example, in the following two verses, *nafs wahida* means something like “from the same species”:

It is He who has created you out of one kind (*nafsin wahidatin*), and out of it brought into being its mate, so that he may find comfort with her. And so, when he has embraced her, she conceives a light burden, and continues to bear it. Then, when she grows heavy, they both call unto God, their Lord, "If You indeed grant us a sound child, we shall most certainly be among the grateful!"

And yet, as soon as he has granted them a sound child, they began to ascribe divinity to other beings beside Him. God is above what they set up as partners! (Quran 7:189-190)

God, we read, creates both man and woman out of the same “stuff” (*nafs*); Adam was created out of *nafs*, and his wife was created out of *nafs* as well (translated “it” here, referring to *nafs*). God creates all humankind from “one kind,” again we read, to “find comfort” in one another.<sup>16</sup> As such, *nafs wahida* refers to the human species in general.

Various interpreters take *nafs* (which, depending on context, we have benignly and with considerably less ontological commitment translated “stuff”<sup>17</sup> or “species”) to mean the English equivalent of soul or being or living entity. So *nafs wahida* is taken to mean that man and woman, prophet and commoner, ruler and ruled were created by Allah from a single soul or single being or single entity. However translated, creation from the same *nafs*—from a single, unified origin—provides theological and ontological grounds for the radical equality of each member of the human race. By establishing the unity of humanity (*ummah*),

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<sup>15</sup> If the verse were referring specifically Adam (as often interpreted), then “*nafs wahida*” would have been preceded by “*el*” article to underline the reference was “Adam.”

<sup>16</sup> The same statement is used in Surah 30- Rum: 21 also.

<sup>17</sup> Which we believe preserves the indeterminacy of the original Arabic (which we also believe should be expected since the Quran is more concerned about belief and practice than metaphysical speculation).

this doctrine confounds racial or tribal superiority, precludes misogyny and gender inequality, and commands mutual respect and compassion (based on ontological kinship).

In summary, according to the Quran, woman is not created from man. Indeed, the Quran teaches that both sexes are created from the same stuff (*nafs wahida*). Therefore, the claim that woman was created from and for man contradicts the Quran.

### **Woman and Original Sin**

Many sermons by orthodox religious leaders present women as the devil's gate to men and warn Muslim men to beware of their deceptions. A 20-year-old girl wrote to us after hearing one of these sermons and asked why God had created her such an evil character.

*I am not sure whether my e-mail finds you or not, but I just want to share my disappointment with my religion with you as a young Muslim girl. I am 20 years old. My parents are very oppressive, that I become a devoted Muslim. Actually, that is also my hope; to become a devoted Muslim. As you know, the traditional wing of Islam makes us not to think but to obey without questioning. But as a member of the young generation, I always look for reasonable answers and try to read and think as much as possible. That is why I always surf on the internet. But two days ago, as I was searching about women in Islam, I listened to an Imam who was claiming that women were the gateways for the devil to human's soul. I was really shocked and disappointed to hear that. How can this be true, or is this true? If so, why has God created me in such an evil character? Please tell me that is not true!*

*May God be with you*

Where does the myth of woman as agent of the devil come from? According to Jewish and Christian traditions, Satan first deceived woman (Eve), and then she persuaded Adam to disobey God's orders. Some Christians have held that due to this "first sin," woman is the "gateway of Satan to humankind;" thus, for centuries, women have been demeaned and diminished as the primary source of wickedness and seduction.

Although the narrative of the first sin is based on the Old Testament's *Book of Genesis*, the New Testament's *Book of Romans* shaped belief in "inherited sin." According to this belief, Adam's sin is inherited by all of his children, who are born with this sin.<sup>18</sup> Our only salvation from sin lies in the mediation of Jesus. The Church's narrative of "the Fall," which begins with Adam's sin, is deeply intertwined with its narrative of redemption, which involves the crucifixion of Jesus as atonement for the sins of humanity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jewish tradition, on the other hand, rejects both the idea that one is born in sin and the idea that people are intrinsically evil. True enough, certain parts of the Pentateuch and the Old Testament (it should be kept in mind that Christians as well consider these texts part of their own Holy Scripture) state that children cannot be held responsible for the sin of their parents. Old Testament, Deuteronomy, p.24,16; Ezekiel, p.18,20. Islam also rejects the concept of "inherited sin."

<sup>19</sup> Just like many sects of Christianity, Orthodoxy also denies the inheritance of sins.

The Jewish and Muslim faiths, on the other hand, reject the Christian belief in the transfer or inheritance of the “original sin” from generation to generation.<sup>20</sup> But, for our discussion, the inheritance of the “original sin” is not at issue. Rather, we are concerned with the influential narrative in which the original sin was the woman’s seduction of man. As the seducer of man, woman, so it is claimed, should be subjected to man’s continuous guardianship, woman, according to this narrative, is the prime mover of evil.

The Quran, for its part, states that Satan deceived *both* Adam and his wife (thus causing their mutual expulsion from Paradise).<sup>21</sup>

But Satan tricked both, and he brought both of them out of from what they were in. And so We said: "Down with you, some of you enemies of one another, and you will have a residence on earth, and enjoyment for a while. (Quran 2:36)

Thereupon Satan whispered to the two to make them conscious of their nakedness, of which they had been unaware, and he said: “Your Lord did not forbid you from this tree lest you two become angels, or lest you live forever.” (Quran 7:20)

The first sin never refers solely to the woman. Indeed according to the Quran, the Fall almost always involves Adam (not his wife):<sup>22</sup>

But Satan whispered to him, he said “O Adam, shall I show you the Tree of Immortality, and a kingdom that never decays?”

And so the two ate from it; thereupon, they became conscious of their nakedness and began to cover themselves with the leaves of the garden. Thus Adam disobeyed his Lord and fell. (Quran 20:120-121)

Since Satan (not Adam’s wife) tempts Adam \*Adam “disobeyed his Lord and fell”), the Quran rejects the attribution of the original sin to woman. Therefore, the claim that women, as the original sinners and temptresses, are tarred with that sin has no basis in the Quran.

However, a fabricated hadith attributes the following to the Prophet:

“If it had not been for Eve, women would never have betrayed their husbands.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The Quran rejects the idea of inherited sin: “nothing shall be accounted to man but what he has strived for; (Quran 53:39).

<sup>21</sup> Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, p.25; Asma Barlas, *Believing Women*, p.138.

<sup>22</sup> Hülya Terzioğlu, *Maturidi’de Kadın Algısı, Gökkubbe*, Istanbul, 2018, p.28.

<sup>23</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, “Enbiya”, 1, 25; Sahih Muslim, “Rada”, 62, 63; Ahmed b. Hanbel, *al-Musnad*, XIII, 402, 504, XIV, 250, 253.

This hadith undergirds the anti-Quranic views we have been discussing: women are alone responsible for the first sin, and sin is transmitted from generation to generation. But since the Prophet cannot contradict the Quran, this Hadith must be rejected.

Nonetheless, Muslim “scholars” incorporated such anti-Quranic views into “Islam.” They accused woman of being the original sinner who led Adam astray; woman, then, is solely responsible for the expulsion of humankind from Paradise. Since all women inherit the first woman’s seductive powers, women must be ruled by men to prevent them from “leading humanity astray.” This anti-Quranic narrative has, for most of Islamic history, wrongly given men permission to subjugate women.

Such beliefs underlie claims that women are inferior to men and, as such, are prone to sin and seduction. The Quran, however, states that men and women are created equal. For example, the Quran holds that men and women are equal in their capacity to reason. Moreover, according to the Quran, the value of people depends on their deeds and piety, not on their sex. And the Quran never ascribes superiority to any tribe, nation, race, inheritance, or sex—only deeds and piety differentiate people before God.

O, men! We have created you all out of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all aware. (Quran 49:13)

As for anyone - be it man or woman - who does righteous deeds and is a believer – We will give him a good life, and We will reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did. (Quran 16:97)

As we wrote at the beginning, God created each person, male and female alike, with the purpose of loving and serving God.

To the distressed woman who wrote, *“I listened to an Imam who was claiming that women were the gateways for the devil to man’s soul. I was really shocked and disappointed to hear that. How can this be true, or is this true? If so, why has God created me in such an evil character?”* we replied, *“On the authority of the Quran, please be assured that women are not the gateway for the devil to the man’s soul and God did not create you evil; God created you equal to men, from the same stuff, and as gloriously equipped and free and responsible to become all that God intends for all humans.”*



**CHAPTER 3**  
**WOMEN THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

Societies throughout history have discriminated against women: women have typically been subject to their fathers until they get married, to their husbands after marriage, and—if their husbands precede them in death—to their sons or other male guardians until the end of their lives. Women are often denied the rights of men, including the rights to participate actively in social life, own property, be educated, or occupy administrative positions, etc. In some contemporary societies, these beliefs persist. In many places around the world, many women still live their lives under the shadow of men and cannot escape subjugation to their fathers or husbands.<sup>24</sup>

Gender inequality, even more vicious than described above, was also dominant at the time the Quran was revealed. The egalitarian Quran, however, ushered in many improvements in the status of women. In this chapter, we shall first briefly evaluate the situation of women before the Quran to better appreciate the differences created by its revelation. Later, we will clarify the rights and freedoms granted to women by the Quran. At the end of this chapter, we will discuss how the lives and status of women worsened following the death of the Prophet Muhammed.

*Pre-Islamic Days*

In the most ancient times, in hunter-gatherer tribal groups, the differences between genders were negligible. Survival matters were so pressing, a woman could scarcely be confined to the cave. Men and women alike shared in hunting and gathering. Remove 50% of the tribe's population and 50% less is hunted and gathered. A certain recipe for disaster given the difficult life early humans faced on the Serengeti.

However, the situation changed drastically with the abandonment of nomadic life forms at the advent of settled life during the agricultural revolution around 10,000 BCE. The rise of animal raising and cultivation of crops saw the diminishment of women in the provision of food as gatherers;<sup>25</sup> also, men, whose physical strength was greater than that of women, acquired more power as these societies and found themselves caught up in wars. "The growth of complex urban societies and the increasing importance of military competitiveness further entrenched male dominance and warrior cultures favoring male dominance consequently emerged."<sup>26</sup> In this new order, men cultivated the land, bred animals, brought food, fought wars, and provided security, which, in turn, elevated men to a superior status, with an accompanying gain of rights. For example, according to early Assyrian law (the oldest known written codification of laws), men had the right to govern and punish women. Such laws granted husbands the right to pull their wives' hair,

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<sup>24</sup> Economic dependency, as many claim, cannot be the sole explanation of this because even in some countries deemed "developed", we find unequal pay between the sexes; women often find it more difficult to find employment, and – because of lower salaries – are less able to acquire property, etc. *An Economy that Works for Woman*, [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org), [https://d1tn3vj7xz9fdh.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/bp-an-economy-that-works-for-women-020317-en-summ.pdf](https://d1tn3vj7xz9fdh.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-an-economy-that-works-for-women-020317-en-summ.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Fatmagül Berktaş, *Tek Tanrılı Dinler Karşısında Kadın*, p.44.

<sup>26</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.12.

cut their ears, and break their teeth with hot bricks if necessary. During this period, the tradition of sequestering women within the walls of their homes began to spread.<sup>27</sup> Married women were required to cover their heads in society, and if they did not comply, they were coated in tar, and their ears were pierced and tied back as punishment.

Ancient Egyptian women, on the other hand, lived much better than those in any of the other major ancient civilizations. Women were considered equal to men in front of the law and had the right to own property. They were accepted as parties of contracts. They could also make a will and inherit property. Royal women had important roles and power as the wives of the sovereign. They could also become Queens as did Hatshepsut (1458-1479 BC) and Cleopatra (69-30 BC).

However, in ancient Athens, considered the cradle of civilization, women spent their lives sequestered within the boundaries of their homes, subject to the guardianship of their fathers, husbands, or sons.<sup>28</sup> By the time they reached twelve or thirteen years of age, girls were expected to get married but were not allowed any say in the choice of husbands. Marriage was conditional on the father's permission, and divorce was a right granted only to men. Only sons could inherit.<sup>29</sup> While daughters could inherit if there were no sons, the right to manage their inheritance was granted to the woman's husband or male guardian, not to the woman.<sup>30</sup> Men and women led separate lives in separate spaces and—while men had the right to walk freely in public spaces--“respectable” women stayed at home, carrying out domestic chores, such as childcare and other mundane work. Even at home, they were allotted living spaces that lacked contact with public spaces. Women were allowed to socialize only with their very closest male kin. Work or chores that had to be carried out outside the perimeters of the home would generally be assigned to slaves and servants. A woman's class was visible by her skin tone: if a woman was tan from contact with the sun, she was of a lower class, while upper-class women had white skin as a result of their seclusion. On those few occasions when a woman would leave the confines of her home (such as attendance at a religious ceremony), she would always be accompanied by male family members and could not be seen in the company of other men. A woman's most important duty was to bear children. The most desirable qualities for girls were silence and obedience.<sup>31</sup> And women did not have any political rights, and no matter how noble they were, they were still not allowed to participate in political matters. On the other hand, women from low-income families could go out more easily, because they contributed to their families' upkeep by working outside.

Women on the Indian subcontinent could neither inherit nor divorce. Women's property was managed by their fathers before marriage, by their husbands after marriage, and by their sons during their widowhood. The custom of the immolation of widows upon the death of their husbands lasted for

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<sup>27</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women*, p.170.

<sup>28</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, p.16.

<sup>29</sup> Beyza Bilgin, *İslam'da Kadının Rolü, Türkiye'de Kadın*, p.16.

<sup>30</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.28-29.

<sup>31</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.28-29.

thousands of years in this region. Women who managed to evade immolation were ostracized by society to the degree that they were not even allowed to attend their children's marriages.

The situation in China was similar to that of India. As in many other cultures, women in China were also subject to the guardianship of their fathers before marriage, of their husbands following the marriage, and of their sons after the death of their husbands.

Misogynistic practices likewise found their way into the Jewish and Christian traditions.<sup>32</sup> We shall limit ourselves to a few examples. For example, Jewish myths hold that woman was created inferior to man and caused man's expulsion from Paradise by seducing him. In traditional Jewish culture, women are excluded to a large degree from participation in social life; they are denied a great part of the rights and freedoms enjoyed by men: women are considered to be a danger for men. Finally, it is claimed that a woman's primary duty is to support her husband. The fact that Orthodox Jewish males begin the day by praising God for not having created them as women is a rather striking custom showing how little women are valued. The Talmud, an important source for the majority of Jewish society, includes many misogynistic interpretations. Some rabbis claim that women were created with a lazy, envious, arrogant, gluttonous, gossipy nature and are prone to magic and witchcraft. According to Yichud Laws, a man cannot be in the company of a girl older than three and a woman cannot be in the company of a boy older than nine; husband and wife, mother and son, father and daughter, grandfather and granddaughter, grandmother and grandson are exempt from this ban. It is not acceptable for a man to be in the same place with two women, not of his family. A woman cannot stay in the same house with a stepson older than nine and a man with a stepdaughter older than three, etc.

Although the New Testament was radically egalitarian ("There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"), early Christian communities would become anti-Semitic, pro-slavery, and patriarchal. Yet during the years of Jesus, and those immediately following his death, women played crucial roles in the expansion of the belief and were as active as those of its male followers. The New Testament states that women were among the original 72 disciples, including, for example, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (Luke 8: 1-3). These women accompanied Jesus as he went from town to town, communicating the gospel on equal footing with his male disciples. We know from the New Testament that there were also many other converted women whose names have been lost to history.<sup>33</sup> In the early days of Christianity, women served as assistant priests, hosted masses in their own homes, and served as missionaries.<sup>34</sup>

Yet early Christians would absorb the sexist practices prevalent in the areas of its expansion. Bart D. Ehrman, in *Lost Christianities*, rejects the misogynistic narratives in the Pauline epistles. Paul was a convert who played the biggest role in shaping early Christianity. Women were much more active in Paul's church

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<sup>32</sup> We will not try to determine which of these practices were later additions to the original Jewish and Christian belief systems; we will leave this to Jewish and Christian theologians.

<sup>33</sup> New Testament, Matthew, 27:55,56.

<sup>34</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, p.166.

than commonly believed, but as time went by, anti-women strictures were added in Paul's name.<sup>35</sup> These later additions would exclude women from the church's public sphere completely. As such, there was a gradual decline in the leadership roles afforded women in Christian life. Women who, when Christianity was expanding within the Roman Empire, had played active roles in the dissemination of the new religion's message and participated in religious and social affairs side-by-side with men, began to lose these rights.

As Christians gained dominion over the Roman state, they began to sequester women in their homes and to exclude them from public spheres under the influence of Roman culture. Consequently, the Church began to acquire a male-dominated structure. Within this context, Church fathers such as Tertullian, Ambrose, and Augustine perceived women as inferior and described them as devilish creatures who are the cause of sin and immorality. Tertullian (160-220) called women the "devil's door" to humankind. He also claimed that women should not speak in church and should not carry out the functions of priesthood. Ambrose (337-397) considered women to be the cause of men's deviation from the right path and claimed that men were created superior to women. Saint Augustine (354-430), who said that he could not figure out why woman was even created, claimed that it would have been much better if another kind of male, rather than a woman, had been created to assist men. He reluctantly conceded that, if so, it would have been impossible for new generations to be born, so woman had to be created. The 6<sup>th</sup> century Synod of Mâcon's debate on whether or not women had a soul shows how the medieval Church approached the female sex.

Throughout early human history, even if there were short-term partial ameliorations and exceptional situations, women's status seldom changed: they remained under male tutelage, and their main duties were seen as the bearing and raising of children and obeying their husbands. This was the situation in 610 A.D., when the Quran began to be revealed in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean areas, regions that were also home to Jewish and Christian communities. Since Islam adopted many practices of the Jewish and Christian traditions, Jewish and Christian traditions played an important role in the shaping of Islam's erroneous perception of women.

Although upper-class women of Arab societies of those days enjoyed a certain degree of respectability, the birth of a baby girl was not well-received. Girls were considered to be unsubstantial creatures, and their feeding, raising, and protection were viewed as burdens on their families. Girls were not preferred because they could not fight or carry out economic activities. So, newly born baby girls were sometimes buried alive. Since men took part in battles, seized booty, and protected property, men alone had the right to inherit.<sup>36</sup> And, since women had no share in those activities, they had no share in the inheritance; moreover, women themselves were perceived as part of the inheritance.<sup>37</sup>

The Quran, sent at a time and place where conditions for women were horrible, rejected the prevailing views of women's denigrated status, rights, and freedoms. The Quran guaranteed women rights and

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<sup>35</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, p.39.

<sup>36</sup> Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, p.134.

<sup>37</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women*, p.170.

freedoms in both religious and legal spheres, freed women from the strictures of their born social class, and stopped them from being men's *de facto* slaves.

### *Women in the Quran*

In the Quran, male superiority is rejected, and women and men are united under the titles of "believers" and "Muslims." The common Quranic expression "*ya ayyühellezine amenu*" ("those who believe") encompasses all believers, women and men, old and young, Arabs and non-Arabs, black and white; consequently, the Quran addresses all believers without distinction or denigration. As such, the status of believing women is the same as that of believing men; all that is promised to believing men is promised to believing women. For example, the virtues required to be God's servant mention both sexes:

Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, men who guard their chastity, women who guard their chastity, men who remember God frequently and women who remember God frequently- God has prepared for them a pardon and an immense reward. (Quran 33:35)

Faith, obedience, patience, charity, chastity, etc., are required equally of all believers, men and women alike. If women and men were radically different, as some think, there would have been different rules and requirements for the two sexes. Instead, in the Quran, God does not distinguish between women and men when he exhorts believers to reason, think, and meditate, or requires such compulsory rituals as prayers, fasting and the pilgrimage, or commends moral virtues like being just, compassionate and trustworthy, or commands people to be patient, pronounce God's name frequently and be virtuous. Expressions addressed only to women or only to men make up less than one percent of the Quran. They include, for example, the requirement for divorced women to wait for three menstruation cycles before they can marry another (to prevent confusion in the paternity of the child).

The Quran, which describes women and men as each other's "friends" (*awliya*), shows no preference for either sex. In the following verse, the Quran asks men and women to support each other for good and against evil.

The believing men and believing women are friends of one another. They advocate virtue, forbid evil, perform the prayers, practice charity, and obey God and his Messenger. It is they upon whom God will bestow his grace: verily, God is almighty, wise! (Quran 9:71)

Women in the Quran are often models of morality, devotion, piety, wisdom. For example, the Queen of Sheeba is described and celebrated as an intelligent and impartial ruler, endowed with great political skills in governing her kingdom, Moses's mother and Pharaoh's wives are models of resistance to tyranny,

Jesus's mother Mary represents a devoted woman full of piety<sup>38</sup>, daughters of the Prophet Shoaib are models of virtue, etc.

Still, in spite of the abundant Quranic evidence to the contrary, some have claimed that Islam does not address women and that most verses are written for and even favor men.

One reason for male-favoring readings of the Quran is (maybe willful) ignorance of Arabic grammar rules. As in many other languages, Arabic requires the use of a masculine pronoun both when addressing a mixed male-female group and a male-only group. On the other hand, female pronouns are used when addressing a female-only group. So the claim that only men are being addressed when the Quran uses a masculine pronoun for general address violates Arabic grammar. For example, the masculine pronoun used when speaking of "those who believe" encompasses all believers, female and male. When men alone are being addressed, we find the expression, "men who believe," and when women alone are addressed, feminine pronouns are used. Consequently, whenever such distinctions are not made, all believers are addressed.

If the Quran were to restrict its general commandments to men, women would be freed from most Islamic obligations, like ritual prayers, fasting, and acting justly. Yet nobody claims that these are obligations only of men.

The claim that the Quran addresses only or mainly men is baseless. The Quran addresses all believers—men and women alike—equally in the eyes of God.

#### *Women in the Days of the Prophet*

Women's active participation in daily life was particularly encouraged by the Prophet Muhammad, and when we look at the first periods of Islam, we see that women were active in every sphere of life (in opposition to today's husband-submissive Muslim women). With the advent of Islam, women, independent of their families or social statuses, were accepted as full members of society, gaining -- both religiously and legally -- rights and privileges that had previously been reserved for men. They could legally receive their husbands' or fathers' inheritance and were no longer seen as a part of the inheritance to be shared. Women could make their own decisions in matters like marriage or divorce, could receive their own bridal gift (*mahr*),<sup>39</sup> had the right to manage their own property, and had the freedom to live without being subject to any man; in short, women acquired the freedom to manage their own lives without a man's intervention. Women, in short, acquired the right to enjoy all rights and freedoms within the newly formed society of which they had become full members, without any discrimination based on their sexes.

In the days of the Prophet, many women were active alongside men, often in leadership positions, actively striving to advance Islam.<sup>40</sup> This should not be surprising because the Quran encourages woman's active participation in all of life. Thus, during the time of the Prophet and of the Rashidun caliphs (the 30-

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<sup>38</sup> Asma Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Quran*, trans: Muneera Salem-Murdock, Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2018, p.30.

<sup>39</sup> Mahr: A Quranic requirement to be given to women upon marriage.

<sup>40</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims*, p.190.

year reign of the first four caliphs following the death of the prophet Muhammad)<sup>41</sup> who succeeded him, one could encounter women poets, scholars, legal experts, religious leaders, nurses, doctors, or even warriors.<sup>42</sup> During the time of the Prophet, women were active in manufacturing, commerce, agriculture, and calligraphy.<sup>43</sup> Women regularly took part in the collective rituals in the mosque which was the center of public life; they were active in commercial affairs and earned money; they were teachers of both women and men; they helped warriors behind the lines; they took on such active responsibilities as tending the sick and wounded, and they even fought bravely in battlefields.

Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet and the first Muslim, was a wealthy merchant who was active outside her home. Born into the Quraysh tribe, which ruled Mecca, she was a respected figure in society. She conducted trade and hired Muhammad to manage her business.<sup>44</sup> Khadijah was the financier of the Islamic movement in its early years. She stood by the Prophet as he struggled to deliver Islam's message (when he was insulted and excluded from society).

Zaynab bint Jash, a wife of the Prophet, was a tanner. The Prophet commissioned Shifaa bint Abdullah, a female companion of the Prophet, to teach his wife, Hafsa bint Umar, to read and write.<sup>45</sup> bint Abdullah which meant "the healer," also practiced medicine. Early Muslim women like Aisha, Hafsa, Umm Salama, (all three are Prophet's wives), Karimah bint Mikdaal, Umm Kulthum, and Aisha bint Sa'd were literate.<sup>46</sup>

Rufaida Al-Aslamia was the first Islamic female surgeon and nurse. Women—Safiyyah, Atikah, Hind bint Harith, and Kabshah bint Rafi—were poets. Women served men as barbers.<sup>47</sup> Umm Waraqa, another female companion (*sahaba*) of the prophet, was active in social life. Since Umm Waraqa knew the Quran better than all the men in her household, she was, with the Prophet's approval, the prayer leader in her home.<sup>48</sup>

Muslim women also fought alongside men on the battlefields. For example, women took part in the Battle of Uhud. Umm Umarah, who provided water to the thirsty, advanced towards the heart of the battle. Umm Umarah also took part in the battles of Hunayn, Hudaibiyah, and Khaybar; when other Muslims fled the battlefield, she held her ground and protected the Prophet.<sup>49</sup> She lost a hand while fighting in the Battle of Yemame, together with Abu Bakr, the first Caliph.<sup>50</sup> Umm Sulaim fought alongside the Prophet.<sup>51</sup> Aisha,

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<sup>41</sup> Rashidun Caliphs: The first four caliphs after the death of the Prophet (Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, Ali ibn Abu Talib).

<sup>42</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, *Islam, Law, and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women's Rights*, p.5.

<sup>43</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "Nikah", 106; Sahih Muslim, "Selam", 34, "Talak", 55; Ahmed b. Hanbel, *al-Musnad*, XXV, 494, XLIV, 502; Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p.83.

<sup>44</sup> Although she was older than Mohammed and had children from previous marriages, they got married; Muhammad was monogamous until her death in 620 when he was 49 years old.

<sup>45</sup> Ahmed b. Hanbel, *al-Musnad*, XLV, 46; Ibn Ebi Şeybe, *el-Musannef*, V, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Belazüri, *Fütuhu'l-büldan*, 454, M.Tayyib Okiç, *İslamiyette Kadın Öğretimi*, p.23-24.

<sup>47</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "Hac", 125; Sahih Muslim, "Hac", 154-155.

<sup>48</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims*, p.191, Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, p.177.

<sup>49</sup> Vakidi, Ebu Abdillah Muhammed b. Ömer b. Vakid el-Eslemi, *el-Megazi*, thk. Marsden Jones, I-III, Beyrut, 1989, III, 902-903.

<sup>50</sup> Asma Afsaruddin *The First Muslims*, p.71.

<sup>51</sup> Zehebi, *Siyeru a'lami'n-nübelä*, II, 204.

the Prophet's wife, took part in many battles with the Prophet.<sup>52</sup> During the Battle of Uhud, Aisha and Umm Sulaim served behind the lines.<sup>53</sup> A group of female companions of the Prophet joined the army besieging Khaybar and served behind the lines as well.<sup>54</sup> Umm Athiyyah joined the Prophet in seven battles.<sup>55</sup>

The Prophet also consulted women and followed their advice. For example, some Muslims reacted against the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah in 628, stating it granted too many advantages to the enemy. Saddened by their negative reaction, the Prophet followed the advice of his wife,<sup>56</sup> Umm Salama to conciliate the tension between Muslims.

During the many discussions that followed the death of the Prophet, Aisha was asked for her advice on disputed matters. Ibn-i Ata, for example, stated, "I often witnessed even the most senior companions of the Prophet consulting Aisha about religious matters. Amongst all people, Aisha was the most knowledgeable about canonical jurisprudence, and her judgments were the most appropriate."<sup>57</sup> For example, Safiyya, who died in 670, had willed 1/3 of her estate to her Jewish nephew. When an argument ensued as to whether or not to obey her will because of the nephew's religion, Aisha was consulted. Aisha deemed the will valid.<sup>58</sup> In addition to her religious erudition, Aisha was also a good poet and knowledgeable on legal and medical matters.<sup>59</sup> Aisha expressed her views with those with whom she had differences of opinion, men and women alike. For example, she disagreed with Ali, the fourth caliph after the Prophet, and she had differences with Abu Hurairah, whom she accused of having transmitted erroneous hadiths.<sup>60</sup>

Extraordinary even today, Aisha commanded an army and waged war on the caliph Ali, whom she accused of injustice. Before the war, she delivered speeches in mosques in which she voiced her opposition to Ali and gathered an army against the caliph. Many people joined Aisha, and she established a base for her army in Basra before going into battle. Not only did she speak directly to men, but she also attracted hundreds of men to her cause, men who fought under her command.

When the first caliph, Abu Bakr, felt that his end was nearing, he entrusted the management of his charitable funds and property to his daughter, Aisha, even though he had sons. The second caliph, Umar, entrusted his copy of the Quran to his daughter, Hafsa, rather than to his sons. Shifaa bint Abdullah was appointed by caliph Umar as an overseer of the marketplace of Medina (something like the mayor).<sup>61</sup> When Umar tried to limit the amount of the bridal gift (*mahr*), a woman criticized him for trying to introduce

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<sup>52</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.54.

<sup>53</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "Cihad", 64, "Menakib", 18, "Megazi", 18; Sahih Muslim, "Cihad", 136.

<sup>54</sup> Sahih Muslim, "Cihad", 135.

<sup>55</sup> Sahih Muslim, "Cihad", 142; Ibn Majah, "Cihad", 37.

<sup>56</sup> After the treaty, the Prophet told the Muslims to shave their heads and sacrifice an animal, but none of them complied with him. Saddened, he went to his tent and told this to his wife, Umm Salama. She then told the Prophet not to worry and to shave his own head and to sacrifice before everyone else. As he did so, his companions, seeing him, followed.

<sup>57</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.70.

<sup>58</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.73.

<sup>59</sup> Ebu Nuaym, *Hilyetü'l-evliya*, II, 49-50; Ibn Abdilber, *el-İsti'ab fi ma'rifeti'l-ashab*, IV, 1883; Ibn Hacer. *Tehzibü't-Tehzib*, XII, 435. For more information look also: Nevzat Aşık, *Hz. Aişe'nin Hadisçiliği*, 27. vd.

<sup>60</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims*, p.161.

<sup>61</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims*, p.40; Dilaver Selvi, *Delil ve Örnekleriyle Kadın ve Aile İlmihali*, p.240.

something that was not in the Quran; he conceded to the woman and changed his mind. Again during the reign of caliph Uthman, Umm Haram joined her husband Ubade b. Samit on a naval campaign to conquer Cyprus.<sup>62</sup> Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet, was active in politics throughout her life and criticized the Omayyad ruling elite. She was vocal in her criticism of governors during speeches she made in mosques, and she organized protests against the governors.<sup>63</sup>

In summary, the Quran encourages women's active participation in life. Moreover, during the first days of Islam, women were active in social life, were educated, worked in every type of job, and acted together with men. Today, unfortunately, many limit women's right to an education, reject women's rights to hold administrative positions, and exclude women from working with men, thus from the public square. In the name of Islam.

### *Degeneration*

The Quran granted women rights and freedoms regardless of their social status or family that up to that time had not existed; women attained a status where they could marry whomever they wished, receive an inheritance, acquire property, get an education, work, receive a bridal gift (*mahr*) and even join men in battlefields. But the status of women began to change following the death of the Prophet. By the time of the Omayyad dynasty (661-750 CE), women began to lose the rights granted to them by the Quran, as society reverted to pre-Islamic times. As Islam expanded over a vast area in a short period of time, Quranic reforms for women clashed with the cultures of societies that had only recently converted to Islam. As a result, new hybrid cultures were born. Thus, the misogynistic cultures of newly conquered areas (like the Byzantine and Sassanid cultures) arose under the guise of "Islam."<sup>64</sup> Once these misogynistic traditions penetrated Islamic culture and were accepted as rules, they became identified with Islam, viewed thereafter as immutable commandments.<sup>65</sup>

As male-favoring interpretations saw the return of the old, misogynistic order, women lost the rights that they had won under the Prophet.<sup>66</sup> The following hadith explains the situation perfectly:

During the time of the Prophet, we would refrain from rebuking or hurting women because we were afraid that a verse about us would be sent. Following the death of the Prophet, we stopped refraining from this.<sup>67</sup>

While the first Muslims were influenced by the Quran, subsequent Muslims were influenced by the cultures in the newly conquered areas. As a result, Muslim societies incorporated the cultures and traditions of societies that had only recently converted to Islam. By the time of the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 CE),

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<sup>62</sup> Sahih Muslim, "Cihad", 160.

<sup>63</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.192.

<sup>64</sup> Melanie P. Mejia, *Gender Jihad: Muslim Women*, p.3.

<sup>65</sup> John Esposito, *Women's Rights in Islam*, p.99.

<sup>66</sup> Zainah Anwar, *Islam and Women's Rights*, p.2.

<sup>67</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "Nikah", 80.

women had been excluded from many areas of social life and had been condemned to confinement within the walls of their homes. The seclusion of women from society, imprisonment in homes, large harems, and the veiling of women are examples of how Sassanid and Byzantine cultures infiltrated Islam.<sup>68</sup>

One might claim that although the status of women worsened after the time of the Prophet, Muslim women still had more rights than the women of other societies of those days. For example, Imam Shafii (767-820) reported that he was educated by women in Madrasas.<sup>69</sup> Abu Jaffar Tabari (839-923) contended that women could serve as judges in all trials. During the reign of Muktedir (895-932), a woman was appointed as chief of the Divan-ı Mezalimi, a court where serious political offences are tried;<sup>70</sup> she would receive public complaints every Friday and immediately make a judgment and sign a decree.<sup>71</sup> Fatima El Fihri (800-880) founded possibly the first university of the world in 859 in Morocco; students traveled from all over the world to study Islamic Studies, astronomy, languages, and sciences. Lubna of Cordoba (d: 984) was an Andalusian intellectual, poet, and mathematician of the second half of the 10th century. She was also secretary to the Caliph of Cordoba. Mariam al-Asturlabiyy, a 10<sup>th</sup>-century scientist, is linked to the design astrolabes, an astronomical and navigation instrument used to predict the position of the sun, moon, planet, and stars. Suyata al-Mahamili (d: 987), who studied in fields such as management, philosophy, an expert in Arab literature, hadiths, and jurisprudence as well as arithmetic and calculations. Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (994-1091), who was the daughter of an Umayyad caliph, was recognized as a brilliant poet even among her male peers. Ibn Asakir (1105-1175), a historian and hadith expert, wrote that some Muslim women were educated as men and were even scholars and that he had attended the lectures of 80 different female scholars.<sup>72</sup>

Notwithstanding these notable examples, the period of the Abbasids, “the Golden Age” for Muslims, was not a Golden Age for women.

Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), one of Islam’s most influential Islamic philosophers, insisted that women should be under the absolute command of their husbands<sup>73</sup> and subject to them;<sup>74</sup> otherwise, women would make it impossible for men to carry out their social and religious duties. He also claimed that restricting women’s “destructive force” was necessary because women, with their evil characteristics, were the most destructive force threatening a Muslim society.<sup>75</sup> Society, he claimed, could survive only by encouraging man’s superiority and sequestering women. He argued that if an unwed man and a woman were to come together by themselves, the devil would be their friend, leading inevitably to misconduct.<sup>76</sup>

In his famous *Ihyau Ulumi’d Din*, Ghazali described the duties of a Muslim woman:

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<sup>68</sup> John Esposito, *Women in Muslim Family Law*, p.11.

<sup>69</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, *Islam, Law, and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women’s Rights*, p.41.

<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>71</sup> Justice Ameer Ali, *history of the Saracenes*, p.199-202, Asgar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p.93.

<sup>72</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, *Islam, Law and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women’s Rights*, p.41.

<sup>73</sup> Imam Gazali, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Knowledge), Vol. 2, p.147-148.

<sup>74</sup> Imam Gazali, *Kimiya-yi Sa’adat The Alchemy of Happiness*, p.223.

<sup>75</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.32-33.

<sup>76</sup> Jami` at-Tirmidhi, “Rada”, 16, “Fiten”, 7; Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.42.

She should live in the deeper recesses of her home. She should not leave her spindle from her hand. She should not come and go from her house too frequently. She should limit her conversations with her neighbors and should visit them only when necessary. When her husband is away, she should safeguard his honor and property. In all her activities, she should strive to make her husband happy. She should betray neither her husband nor his property. She should get permission from him before leaving the confines of her home. Whenever she does go out with his permission, she should hide her charms in rags. She should prefer side streets rather than busy districts and market places. She should refrain from making her voice heard and from revealing herself to a stranger. She should conceal her presence from someone she thinks knows her or from someone she thinks she knows. She should strive to complete her domestic affairs but should not neglect her prayers and fasting. When a friend of her husband knocks on her door, and her husband is not at home, she should not even ask who is at the door, and she should not enter into a conversation with him. She should do all this for her own sake and her husband's honor.<sup>77</sup>

Like other brilliant and influential misogynistic philosophers before him (say, Aristotle), Ghazali considered women to be distorted versions of men. Identifying Ghazali's views with Islam has likely damaged more women than any of those of other brilliant and influential misogynistic philosophers.

Ghazali was not alone in thinking of women as defective. When speaking of women, the famous statesman and political scientist Nizamülmülk (1018-1092) (a contemporary of Ghazali) says of women that "their minds are deficient..."<sup>78</sup>

Yet in the 13-14<sup>th</sup> century, somehow and against all social pressures and expects, some exceptional women overcame such obstacles and rose to active and prestigious positions within society—positions like teachers of canonical jurisprudence, preachers, poetesses, viziers, and counselors. For example, important religious scholars were educated in madrassas by women (1211-1282):<sup>79</sup> Ibn Hajar al-Asqalan (1372-1449) had 53 female teachers, and Al-Suyuti (1445-1505) had 33. Historians Al Dhahabi (1274-1348) and Abu'l-Fida (1273-1331), accepted their diplomas from the hands of female scholars.<sup>80</sup> During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Turkish women in Anatolia, nomads and city-dwellers alike, did not hide from men; they greeted and served and saw off their guests.

However, and there's always an "however," in the *Kutadgu Bilig*<sup>81</sup>, the first general advice book in Turkish, we read: "My Friend, let me tell you my final word; it would be better if the baby is not a girl and if it is, it is better she does not live."<sup>82</sup> During the enthronement ceremony of Alaaddin Keykubat (1190–1237), women were not seen in public, watching the proceedings from the windows of their chambers.<sup>83</sup> In his *Ahkâm al-Nisa*, Ibn al-Jawzi (1126-1200), a scholar of canonical law, summarized women's ideal behavior: women should go out only if absolutely necessary and only with their husband's permission; when out, women should wear their oldest clothes, walk on the least busy roads, shun crowded places, and being

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<sup>77</sup> Imam Gazali, *Ihÿâ' 'Ulûm al-Dîn* (The Revival of the Religious Knowledge), p.171.

<sup>78</sup> Nizamulmülk, *Siyasetname*, p.194-198.

<sup>79</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, *Islam, Law, and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women's Rights*, p.41.

<sup>80</sup> John Esposito, *Women's Rights in Islam*, p.105.

<sup>81</sup> *Kutadgu Bilig*: It is written by Yusuf Has Hacip, an Uyghur Turk in the 11th century to address to his sovereign Tagbac Bugra Han.

<sup>82</sup> Beyza Bilgin, *İslam'da Kadının Rolü Türkiye'de Kadının Rolü*, p.103.

<sup>83</sup> Beyza Bilgin, *İslam'da Kadının Rolü Türkiye'de Kadının Rolü*, p.103.

careful not to be heard by men. Why? Because, he writes, once a woman leaves her home, the devil immediately begins to accompany her.<sup>84</sup>

During the days of the Prophet, women participated actively in life, worked in all areas, and fought in battles. Women could become doctors or merchants and had the freedom to manage their own lives. The abolition of these anti-Quranic rights could have been achieved only through the corrosive return of cultural practices and the lamentable influence of religious scholars like Ghazali.

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<sup>84</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslim*, p.160.

## Chapter 4

### After the Prophet

Many non-Quranic beliefs that infiltrated Islam, taken as sanctified, negatively affected the status of women within society: “women are dangerous,” “women are born with a tendency to sin,” and “women the devil’s entrance into the human soul.” According to Mohammed Al-Kaneeny man and woman should never be left alone unless they are married or members of the immediate family. Otherwise, according to him, Satan’s unavoidable presence would result in great sins. When asked where he got this information, he referred to the hadith below:

While he was at an assembly conversing, the Prophet saw a beautiful woman, and he immediately went home to his wife Zaynab, as she was tanning leather and had sexual intercourse with her. He then went to his Companions and told them: The woman advances and retires in the shape of a devil, so when one of you sees a woman, he should come to his wife, for that will repel what he feels in his heart.”<sup>85</sup>

Yet, although the Quran warns believers that property, titles, and fame can lead people astray, it never says that women will lead men astray.

Your worldly goods and your children are but a trial and a temptation, whereas with God, there is a tremendous reward. (Quran 64:15)

The identification of the woman with the devil, with evil, and with seduction prevented women from working or worshiping with or even talking to men. As a result, women were prevented from securing an education and excluded from the public square. Many women were sequestered within their homes.

#### *Education and Social Life*

The Quran, which highly values knowledge, calls *all* believers to think and reason for themselves. In Quran 8.22, we read that the worst of all creatures are those who do not reason and understand. And since Quran encourages active participation in public life, all people should have full and equal access to a good education. Prominent Islamic theologian Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198) supported the education of women on the basis of their intellectual equality to men. Because men and women are made of the same stuff (share the same nature), women are equal to men in every important aspect; so women should be warriors, governors, religious scholars, and philosophers. He viewed the plight of women—with their capacity for higher pursuits overlaid by their desperate servitude—as little more than plants caring for their men. So he writes:

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<sup>85</sup> Sahih Muslim, “Nikah”, 9; Abu Dawood, “Nikah”, 44; Jami` at-Tirmidhi, “Rada”, 9.

Our society allows no scope for the development of women's talents. They seem to be destined exclusively to childbirth and the care of children, and this State of servility has destroyed their capacity for larger matters. It is thus that we see no women endowed with moral virtues; they live their lives like vegetables, devoting themselves to their husbands. From this stems the misery that pervades our cities, for women outnumber men by more than double and cannot procure the necessities of life by their own labors.

Excluding fifty percent of the capable talent from the workforce is a recipe, he argues, for socio-economic disaster. In order to empower talent, everyone—men and women equally—should be educated to their fullest. And then offered social positions—from warriors to lawyers to rulers—that fit their natural and cultivated talents. If you want to avoid poverty, employ 100% of your capable human capital.

Unfortunately, Averroes' advice about educating women didn't catch on.

After the death of the Prophet, women lost access to education due to fabricated hadiths. Consider the following examples:

Do not let women sit in visible spots and do not teach them to read and write. Teach them to sew...<sup>86</sup>

The women came to the Prophet and said: "Oh God's Messenger! Men will be rewarded with Heaven since they go to *jihad*; what shall we do to gain the same rewards? The Prophet answered: "Those of you who stay at home, will have the same rewards of those waging holy war in the name of God."<sup>87</sup>

Women have been prevented from receiving an education because it is believed that if they were to learn how to write, they would use this skill for unlawful (*haram*) communication with men. So education was long restricted to men.<sup>88</sup>

A young Afghani woman, let us call her Bahara, who asked to stay anonymous due to threats from the Taliban, told us that Islam entered Afghanistan with the bright promise of the equality of the sexes. But as soon as the Taliban gained control, they banned women from getting an education even though there were already outstanding women lawyers, doctors, nurses, and teachers in the country. Now Afghani women cannot go to schools and gain an education; women are confined to their homes with the exception of attending small private lectures to be taught how to be a good wife and Muslim. Through her tears, Bahara told us that she has lost not only her right to an education but also the very possibility of being human.

Although women under the Taliban are not generally allowed to get an education, there are a few exceptions. Women can still work in specific sectors like the health care sector (since male doctors are not allowed to treat females, women doctors and health care personnel are needed) but they are not allowed to work with their male colleagues. And since they are not free to advance in their education, they can never accumulate any wealth. Thus, they were forced into economic dependence; they end up being subject to their husbands to survive.

The Quran, on the other hand, claims that learning elevates believers and that learning is required to stand in awe of God. And education is the process through which a person learns.

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<sup>86</sup> Taberani, *el-Mu'cemül-evsat*, VI, 34; Hakim, *el-Müstedrek 'ale's-Sahihayn*, II, 430.

<sup>87</sup> Bezzar, *el-Bahru'z-zehhar*, XIII, 339.

<sup>88</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press, Oxfordshire, 2015, p.26.

Or one who devoutly worships throughout the night, prostrating himself or standing up, ever-mindful of the life to come, and hoping for his Lord's grace?" Say: "Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?" [But] only they who are endowed with insight keep this in mind! (Quran 39:9)

...Of all his servants, only the endowed with knowledge, respect God truly. God is almighty, much-forgiving. (Quran 35:28)

Educating all believers is the Quranic ideal.

Yet fabricated hadiths mitigate against the Quranically-demanded education of women, claiming that women should not be allowed to learn how to read and write. Indeed, many hadiths commend the right of education of women. And many hadiths say that in the Prophet's time, women like Rafidah Aslamiyah, Umm Muta, Umm Kabsha were experts in medicine and surgery, Kabshah bint Rafi, Hind bint Harith, Atikah were known for excellence in poetry<sup>89</sup>, Aisha, Prophet's wife, was the most educated person in Islamic jurisprudence, etc. Why, then, has the tradition focused on just the hadiths that ban women from education?

The women-denigrating, fabricated hadiths keep women uneducated, restrict them to domestic activities such as sewing, housework, childcare, and sever their ties with the outside world. Consider this quotation from a book written for women:

Not every kind of education is useful for everybody, nor is it needed by all... Women should be educated and gain experience in matters like marriage and familial order, childcare and education, domestic chores, general health care, religious obligations, support of ill, poor or otherwise needy people, and first aid in case of natural disasters or war.<sup>90</sup>

While such an education would outfit a woman to be queen of her castle, subject always to her king, it would preclude her being a merchant, engineer, architect, archaeologist, or sociologist.

Yet, again, the Quran affirms (and early Islamic communities demonstrated) education and full participation in public life for all.<sup>91</sup>

And thus does their Lord answer their prayer:

And so their Lord answered them: "I will not waste the work of any worker among you, whether male or female. You are one of another. For those who migrated, and were expelled from their homes, were persecuted because of Me, and fought and were killed- I will remit for them their sins and will admit them into gardens beneath which rivers flow- a reward from God. With God is the ultimate reward." (Quran 3:195)

The Quran, which never discriminates between men and women, does not forbid women from playing active roles in all areas of life. And to be leaders, women need to be educated.

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<sup>89</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p.82,83.

<sup>90</sup> Dilaver Selvi, *Delil ve Örnekleriyle Kadın ve Aile İlmihali*, p.32.

<sup>91</sup> Ali Osman Ateş, *Hadis Temelli Kalıp Yargılarda Kadın*, p.142-145.

### *Leadership Roles*

Although there have been zero female Presidents of the United States, there have been ten democratically-elected female presidents or prime ministers of Muslim-majority countries. Ten Muslim women have ruled their nations! Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990, 1993-1996) in Pakistan, Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004) in Indonesia, Tansu Çiller (1993-1995) in Turkey, Mame Madior Boye (2001-2002) in Senegal, Khaleda Zia (1991-1996, 2001-2006) and Sheikh Hasina Wazed (1996-2001, 2009-present) in Bangladesh, Masoumeh Ebtekar (1997-2005) in Iran, Cisse Mariam Sidibe (2011-2012) in Mali, Atifete Jahjaga (2011-2016) in Kosovo, Ameenah Gurib (2015-2018) Mauritius, and Halimah Yacob (2017-present) in Singapore are the most recent female presidents, prime ministers or vice presidents in Muslim-majority countries.

Yet the myth persists: women are unsuited for political positions because they are both mentally deficient and controlled by their emotions. According to Hassan Hamedy, women cannot govern because they are “controlled by their emotions rather than their minds.” As such, women cannot be judges, ministers, or administrators. Ironically, even women are conditioned support the benighted idea that women are deficient compared to men. Fatma Ahmed, for example, came to believe that since God created her deficient, she has to accept her condition and live a life controlled by men (whom are, after all, much wiser than herself).

Such women-denigrating claims are based on such fabricated hadiths as:

“A community that will entrust its affairs to women will never recover.”<sup>92</sup>

“If you let the management to women, then under the ground would be a better place for you than the above.”<sup>93</sup>

Some attribute the first hadith to the Prophet.

The hadith—“a community that will entrust its affairs to women will never recover”—allegedly appeared immediately after the Battle of Jamel,<sup>94</sup> the first civil war (the first civil strife (*fitnah*) among Muslims).<sup>95</sup> This first civil war was blamed on a woman—Aisha, the Prophet’s wife!

After the murder of the third caliph, Uthman, in 656, Ali was elected as the fourth caliph. Aisha led a group against Ali for not apprehending Uthman’s murderers. Aisha’s objection, allied with her army, precipitated the war. Aisha gave speeches in mosques for support. Many companions of the Prophet<sup>96</sup> supported Aisha.<sup>97</sup> But Aisha lost the battle against Ali. After this costly civil war, Abu Bakr “miraculously” remembered the hadith stating that women should not hold leadership positions.

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<sup>92</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, “Megazi”, 84, “Fiten”, 17; Jami` at-Tirmidhi, “Fiten”, 75; Nesai, “Adabü’l-Kudat”, 8.

<sup>93</sup> Jami` at-Tirmidhi, “Fiten”, 78.

<sup>94</sup> The Battle of Jamel: a battle fought between Ali ibn Abu Talib, who was the cousin and son-in-law of the deceased Prophet, and also the fourth Rashidun Caliph and A'isha, widow of Prophet Muhammad to avenge the death of the third caliph Uthman who had recently been murdered.

<sup>95</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.50; Asgar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p.77.

<sup>96</sup> The Prophet’s tribe.

<sup>97</sup> Abu Bakr said to have recounted this hadith, remained neutral during this battle and chose not to criticize her. Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p.77.

Of course, if this hadith was authentic, at least one of the companions or Abu Bakr himself could have mentioned it when they first heard that Aisha was gathering an army!

More plausibly, this hadith was fabricated for political reasons. As the Prophet's wife, Aisha could not be criticized directly. But after igniting Islam's first serious disagreement and war, her opponents made up a hadith to criticize her indirectly.

Many fabricated hadiths instruct Muslim men to disregard women's ideas:

"Consult women and do the opposite of their advice."

"Always disagree with women, for that is the most auspicious thing to do."

"You will always regret it if you comply with women."

If these hadiths are genuine, women should not be entrusted with leadership positions (or even the care of children).

However, Ali Osman Ates, a contemporary hadith scholar, argues that Muslims should not trust either the meaning of those hadiths or their transmitters.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, these hadiths should be rejected first and foremost because they contradict the Quran;<sup>99</sup> they also conflict with other hadiths in which the Prophet consults his wives and follows their recommendations.

The Quran, for example, praises the Queen of Sheeba for her administration and political decisions, which spared her people from a useless war. When the Quran does critique a bad leader, it is always directed at men (such as the pharaohs); no female leader is ever criticized.

Bottom line: the Quran, as noted by Averroes, requires the appointment of the most competent people to leadership positions, independent of their gender:

Indeed, God commands you to delegate the responsibilities to those who are qualified and judge between people with justice. It is always excellent what God instructs you. Indeed, God is ever-hearing and seeing. (Quran 4:58)

### *Travel*

Years ago, when I<sup>100</sup> was not married, I wanted to go to Mecca for *Hajj*. When I started filling out the visa application, and I saw that I was not allowed to enter the Saudi Kingdom since I did not have a male guardian to travel with me to Mecca. I called the Embassy and asked what that meant. I was told that since I was not married and was younger than 40-years old, I had to have a male immediate family member to accompany me; otherwise, I was not permitted to travel to Mecca. I was shocked. When I asked the reason, the male voice on the other side, told me that Islamic forbade women from traveling alone. That was the first time I ever heard such a requirement. In the end, I persuaded my father to travel with me, and I was permitted to go to Mecca.

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<sup>98</sup> Ali Osman Ates, *Hadis Temelli Kalıp Yargılarda Kadın*, p.99-101.

<sup>99</sup> Asgar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p.76, Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, p.89.

<sup>100</sup> Feryal Taslaman.

Interpreters of Islam have generally permitted (with some reservations) a Muslim woman to travel short distances alone, but only after obtaining permission from her husband. However, according to most traditional interpretations, a woman who travels any great distance must be accompanied by a man of her family (her father, uncle, brother or husband). It is claimed that the Prophet had said,

“It is not acceptable that a woman believing in God and the Day of Judgment should embark on a trip of three days or longer without being accompanied by her father or son or husband or brother or by other men, whom she cannot ever marry according to Islamic regulations.”<sup>101</sup>

We also read:

“It is not acceptable that a woman believing in God and the Day of Judgment should travel to a distance of one day and one night, without being accompanied by a man, whom she cannot legally marry.”<sup>102</sup>

The distance to which a woman can travel without being accompanied by a male relative is generally accepted to be a maximum of 90 km from her home; disobeying this provision is *haram* (forbidden).

If anything not prohibited by the Quran is permitted (see chapter 1), then the absence of a travel ban in the Quran is sufficient to maintain that women are permitted to travel by themselves. Moreover, in the days of the Prophet, women traveled anywhere they wished. There are, for example, many stories of women migrating from Mecca to Medina (a distance greater than 90 km). The Prophet never criticized women who made this journey alone; indeed, they were always praised for enduring the hardships of travel. If traveling more than 90km without a male relative was forbidden for Muslim women, how could the Prophet herald women who traveled alone!<sup>103</sup>

Because of this fabricated ban, today's Muslim women face difficulties. Women who do not have a male relative to accompany them are denied the right to pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a religious duty for all believers. Consider a hadith used to support this ban:

When the Prophet said: “No woman should travel except with a male relative,” a man stood up and said: “O Messenger of God, I want to go out to fight, but my wife wants to go for Hajj.” he said: “Go out for Hajj with her.”<sup>104</sup>

Contrary to this ban, the Quran says that “*Pilgrimage ... is a duty owed to God by all people who can undertake it* (Quran 3:97).

Since the Quran places no limits on women's freedom to travel, banning travel unless accompanied by a man was fabricated to subjugate women to men. Of course, given dangers like banditry, a *recommendation* that women not travel alone may have been issued as a precaution. However, Muslims

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<sup>101</sup> Sahih Muslim, “Hac”, 423.

<sup>102</sup> Sahih Muslim, “Hac”, 421; Jami` at-Tirmidhi, “Rada’”, 15.

<sup>103</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, “Menakib”, 15.

<sup>104</sup> Sahih Bukhari, “Nikah”, 110, “Cezaü's-Sayd”, 24, “Cihad”, 139, 178; Sahih Müslim, “Hac”, 424.

should never elevate prudential recommendations or historical customs from a certain stage of history to religious commandments concerning the entire community of all ages. Women, like men, are free to travel wherever and whenever they wish.

### *Exclusion from Mosques*

Even though half of the Muslim community is women, they are not treated equally to men in respect of being “believers.” Zariah Batma, a Moroccan student living in Istanbul, became convinced that Friday prayer<sup>105</sup> is mandatory for female Muslims. So she decided to go to the nearest mosque the following Friday. In Turkey, like most Muslim-majority countries, Friday prayers are believed to be mandatory only for men. So women are banned from entering the mosques during the Friday prayers. Yet Batma went early to the prayers and found a place in the women’s section. But after the men started to arrive, they were disturbed by her presence. One of them told her that she was not allowed to be there and must return to her home. She pretended not to hear him. Another came and insulted her for causing a disturbance in the Muslim community; he demanded that she leave the mosque immediately. Finally, a man accused her of being a secret Israeli Mossad agent trying to cause a dispute in Islam. She left the mosque in tears.

Historically, Muslim women have been banned or at least discouraged from taking part in prayers together with the rest of their community. Since, so the story goes, the best place for women is their homes, they should pray at home instead of a mosque. The exclusion of menstruating women from mosques and other religious duties likewise further distances them from places of worship. The following fabricated hadiths support this prohibition:

“A woman’s prayer in her home’s courtyard is better than her prayer in a mosque, her prayer inside her home is more virtuous than the one in the courtyard, and prayer in the inner chamber is more virtuous than the one in the open sections of her home.”<sup>106</sup>

“A woman is a man’s dignity and honor. When she goes out, the devil will accompany her. It is at home that she is closest to God.”<sup>107</sup>

Yet there is simply no Quranic justification for excluding women from mosques and collective prayers. Moreover, sequestering women in their homes contradicts both the Quran and common practice during the days of the Prophet. At that time, all believers—female and male—assembled at the great mosque in Medina, the center of religion, education, and social life. At the great mosque, they would pray and socialize together. Women took part in festivity prayers, in Friday prayers, in regular prayers, and in every collective ritual alongside men. Women listened to the Prophet’s sermons and took part in debates held on these

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<sup>105</sup> Friday prayer: is an Islamic ritual performed in congregation every Friday in the mosques and it is mandatory for all Muslims to attend.

<sup>106</sup> Abu Dawood, “Salat”, 54.

<sup>107</sup> Ibn Huzeyme, *Sahih*, III, 93; Taberani, *el-Mu’cemü’l-’evsat*, III, 189, VIII, 101.

occasions; they freely expressed their views on religious matters. There was no distinction between women and men in these practices.<sup>108</sup>

Hadiths that describe women and men together in mosques and collective prayers dramatically outnumber the hadiths that exclude women from their worship of God. See, for example:

Aisha had said: "One night after performing my *isha* prayer in the mosque, I returned home after the Messenger of God. he asked me where I had been. I told Him that we were listening to one of his companions, reciting the Quran in the mosque and that he had a beautiful voice. After hearing this, the two of us went back to the mosque and started listening to him together. The Messenger of God turned to me and said, he is Salim, a slave freed by Abu Huzayfa."<sup>109</sup>

"The Prophet reserved one of the three doors of the mosque in Medina to women so that it would be easier for them."<sup>110</sup>

"The Prophet was sensitive towards the needs of women with children in the mosque, and if he heard a child crying during prayers, he would shorten prayers."<sup>111</sup>

During the Rashidun dynasty, women attended mosques just like men:

Umar's wife joined other members of the community for *fajr* and *isha* prayers in the mosque. When she was asked why she went to the mosque for her prayers, despite the fact that her husband did not approve it due to his jealousy, she replied: "Umar cannot ban me from coming to the mosque because the Prophet had said, "Do not ban women from going to the mosques."<sup>112</sup>

During a Friday sermon, Caliph Umar tried to put a limit on bridal gifts (*mahr*). He was challenged by a woman, who stood up in the middle of the mosque and pointed out that his proposal violated Islamic law. He conceded, and his proposed policy was never carried out:

She said: "Oh, Umar, you do not have the right to do this because, in the Quran, God says, "Even if you have given loads of bridal gift (*mahr*), do not take away anything from it." Upon which he said, "Umar was wrong, the woman is right."<sup>113</sup>

According to this hadith:

- Women participated in collective rituals such as the Friday prayers.
- Women were allowed to object during collective rituals like the Friday prayers.
- Women's objections were accepted by high-level leaders like the caliph.
- Since the woman's physical description is described, women did not conceal themselves with coverings while in mosques.

Therefore, we should reject fabricated commandments that forbid women from collective rituals or for publicly expressing their views.

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<sup>108</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.72.

<sup>109</sup> Hakim, *el-Müstedrek 'ale's-Sahihayn*, III, 250.

<sup>110</sup> Abu Dawood, "Salat", 17.

<sup>111</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "Ezan", 65.

<sup>112</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "*Cuma*", 11. It is reported that his wife was in the mosque praying when Umar, the third Caliph, was assassinated.

<sup>113</sup> Tahavi, *Şerhu müşkili'l-asar*, XIII, 57.

The Quran demands that all believers participate in compulsory Friday prayers; it makes no distinction between women and men:

O You who believe! When the call is made for prayer on Congregation Day, hasten to the remembrance of God, and leave all worldly commerce: this is for your good if you but knew it.

And when the prayer is over, disperse freely on earth and seek to obtain [something] of God's bounty; but remember God often, so that you might attain to a happy state! (Quran 62:9-10)

Sequestering women at home and preventing them from going to mosques and from taking part in collective rituals has nothing to do with the Quran and Islam properly understood.

#### *Source of Temptation*

Abu Hanzala, a so-called imam, declared on Youtube that women are the biggest and most dangerous temptations created in the world for men. Muslim men should be aware of this and take all necessary precautions not to be deceived. They should avoid eye contact and should avoid being alone with women if they are not in one's immediate family. He, like the tradition, places the biggest burden is on women, the source of temptation. They should not leave their homes unless it is urgent; if they have to go out, they require the permission of their husbands. When outside, they should take deserted routes as much as possible. This so-called "imam" preaches a fabricated Islam, declaring a war on women.

According to Islam, everything we face in life is a part of our trial in this world. In this context, our possessions, status, and even our children can lead to "temptation" (*fitna*) if not used properly. For example, the Quran states that Muslims should give some of their possessions to the poor and the needy. However, for those who do not distribute enough of their possessions, those possessions may turn into a source of "temptation." Even children may be a source of temptation if they lead their parents astray:

...and know that your worldly goods and your children are but a trial and a temptation and that God possesses an immense reward. (Quran 8:28)

Your worldly goods and your children are but a trial and a temptation, whereas with God, there is a tremendous reward. (Quran 64:15)

Moreover, women can surely tempt men (of course, and vice versa, men can tempt women).

Although everything can become a temptation to us, the fabricated Islamic tradition reserves pride of place for the temptations women (as special sources of evil). Consider a fabricated hadith attributed to the Prophet:

"I left behind no temptation more harmful to men than women."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "Nikah" 18; Sahih Muslim, "Zikir", 97; Jami` at-Tirmidhi, "Edeb", 31.

But women are not especially liable to tempt; and the greatest temptation is different for everyone. Some are tempted by possessions, pride, or family; some by laziness. The opposite sex, of course, can tempt us; for men, women may be a source of temptation, and for women, men can be. However, declaring that women are only the sources of temptation (and blaming their seductive powers rather than men's weaknesses), as some traditionalists do, is a grave error, one not permitted by the Quran.

### *Prostration before Husbands*

A few years ago, we received the following letter, expressing a sentiment not uncommon among young Muslim women:

*Salamun Alaikum*

*I am 21 years of age Muslim girl who recently got engaged. Me and my family try to live following the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammed (PBU), Sunnah, and the Quran. Being a devoted Muslim is very important to me. That is why I was very happy to accept Faisal's marriage proposal, who is also a very devoted and pious Muslim. We talk with Faisal on the phone for hours, about the future, our family, and our children... One day when we were talking on the phone again, he told me that the wives should obey their husbands to a degree that they should even prostrate themselves in front of them if it was possible. I was shocked when I heard that. It was soooo the opposite of what I had learned until then because we only prostrate in front of Allah. I did not say anything to him since I really trust his religious knowledge, but I felt really odd. Then I checked the Islamic literature, and I saw the hadith:*

*"If I were to command anyone to make prostration before anyone besides Allah, I would have commanded the wife to prostrate before her husband. A woman does not fulfill the right to her Lord unless she fulfills the right of her husband."<sup>115</sup>*

*I could not believe my eyes. How could a Prophet (PBU) who is full of love, mercy, and compassion ask women to be the slaves to their husbands? Please help me? Is this the attitude Allah wants from women when they get married? If so, I really do not want to get married.*

*Your sister  
Mariam Hamid*

Mariam is a young Muslim women who both tries to live according to Islamic traditions and who also thinks for herself. She knows this: people should prostrate themselves only before Allah. Islam's strict monotheism holds that prostrating oneself before anything other than God—is blasphemy. But, being part of a tradition, she hesitates. Maybe she misunderstands what God really wants for her.

The transmitter of this particular hadith, Abu Hurairah, has been widely criticized for his trustworthiness. He is the source of this and many other misogynistic hadiths. In terms of sheer numbers, Abu Hurairah is the number one hadith transmitter. Yet, Izzudin Ibn-ul Esir (d: 1233), in *Usdul'l-Gabe*, wrote: "Abu Hurairah is the most disputed companion of the Prophet. There is nobody else disputed as much as him."<sup>116</sup> The third caliph Umar appointed Abu Hurairah governor of Bahrain and then dismissed him for abuse of authority; when Abu Hurairah returned home, some of the money he brought back was

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<sup>115</sup> Jami' at-Tirmidhi, "Rada'", 10; Abu Dawood, "Nikah", 41; Ibn Majah, "Nikah", 4.

<sup>116</sup> Mahmud Ebu Reyeye, *Kimliği ve Kişiliğiyle Ebu Hureyre*, p.38.

confiscated as unjustly earned.<sup>117</sup> Ibn Sad's *Tabakat* recalls that Abu Hurairah himself said that Umar had called him, "Enemy of God and his Book!"<sup>118</sup> Umar was not alone in his criticisms; many people close to the Prophet criticized Abu Hurairah for his hadiths.

Hadiths which tells women to prostrate themselves before their husbands contradict the following verse of the Quran:<sup>119</sup>

Now among his signs are the night and the day, as well as the sun and the moon. If it is truly Him you serve, do not prostrate to the sun, nor the moon but to God who created them. (Quran 41:37)

The Quran, the prime source of Islamic monotheism, explicitly condemns prostration before someone or something other than God and commands people to prostrate before God only. Men, who demand their wife's prostration, are blasphemers, putting themselves in the place of God.

### *Hell*

The unreliable Abu Hurairah also constructed this fabrication:

The Messenger of God went out to the *musalla* (prayer place) on the day of Eid al-Adha. He passed by the women and said, 'O women! Give charity, for I have seen that you form the majority of the people of Hell.' They asked, 'Why is that, O Messenger of God?' he replied, 'You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands.'<sup>120</sup> I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religious commitment than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you.' The women asked, 'O Messenger of God, what is deficient in our intelligence and religious commitment?' he said, 'Is not the testimony of two women equal to the testimony of one man?' They said, 'Yes.' he said, 'This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Is it not true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?' The women said, 'Yes.' he said, 'This is the deficiency in her religious commitment.'<sup>121</sup>

According to this hadith, the Prophet declares that women constitute the majority in Hell because they curse frequently and are ungrateful to their husbands. Many accept this hadith as authentic. Yet the hadith, unlike the Quran, dooms women to a hopeless situation; many women believe that whatever they do, it will be almost impossible for them to go to Paradise when they die.

Amina Kovačević, a university student in Bosnia, sent an email asking us what to do after hearing this hadith. She wrote that if she were to get married, it would be impossible not to complain or not to argue with her husband all through her life—which would cause her to go to hell for being ungrateful towards her husband. On the other hand, if she were not to get married, she would have a much higher chance of going to paradise. She felt that she faced a miserable choices: stay faithful to God and not get married, or get married and be unfaithful to God.

We shared with Amina what we will now share with you.

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<sup>117</sup> Mahmud Ebu Reyze, *Kimliği ve Kişiliğiyle Ebu Hureyre*, p.86-88.

<sup>118</sup> Ibn Sa'd, *et-Tabakatü'l-kübra*, IV, 335.

<sup>119</sup> One source of this mistake involves presenting womanhood as evil by its very nature. By proclaiming women by nature evil, it becomes easier to believe them to be the greatest source of temptation. Yet one can believe women are, by nature, evil only by rejecting the teachings of the Quran.

<sup>120</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, "Hayiz", 6; Sahih Müslim, "Iman", 132.

<sup>121</sup> Jami' at-Tirmidhi, "Iman", 6; Müslim, "Iman", 132.

Again (and again and again), we must evaluate this hadith within the framework of the Quran. Admonitions about Hell, in the Quran, are never addressed to a particular sex, they are addressed to everyone, man and woman alike:

Indeed! Those whoever commits misdeeds, and becomes besieged by his mistakes- these are the inmates of the Fire, wherein they will dwell forever. (Quran 2:81)

And on the Day of Resurrection, you will see those who told lies about God with their faces blackened. Is there not a place in Hell for the arrogant? (Quran 39:60)

Neither Paradise nor Hell is reserved for certain genders. Both are attained by the same sorts of deeds (or misdeeds), regardless of gender.

Moreover, the claim that women are the majority of Hell because they are ungrateful to their husbands, again, attributes a divine status to men that is completely out of place in Islamic monotheism: God, according to the Quran, is the only One to whom Muslims should be grateful:

So remember Me, and I shall remember you, and be grateful to Me, and do not deny Me. (Quran 2:152)

And when your Lord proclaimed:” If you give thanks, I will grant you increase; but if you are ungrateful, My punishment is severe.” (Quran 14:7)

The fabricated hadith that conditions women’s entry into Paradise upon their husbands’ approval perpetuates the myth that the essential religious obligation of women is to obey and satisfy their husbands. One might imagine that people inclined to enslave women to their husbands would have fabricated such hadiths, putting the fear of hell into women through the mouth of the Prophet. Yet the merciful Quran aims to alleviate such fears, assuring men and women alike of their equal ability to enter into Paradise.

### *Deficient in Mind*

Because of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Gulpari Nuristani knew that it would be hard for her to get a regular education. Gulpari desperately wanted to learn as much as possible before she was forced into a marriage, the fate of the 1/3 of the girls under 18. Her wise father supported her desire. But they were very poor and the closest school was at the next village; the only education she could get was in the classes held by the imam of her small village. In the imam’s “school,” girls and boys met in separate classes and were taught different topics. Girls’ education focused on the things girls were expected to know: Islamic requirements, house chores, how to raise children, and how to be a good wife. The boys, of course, learned the important man things. But Gulpari wanted to learn the things taught to boys.

When Gulpari complained to her mother, her mother told her that she had neither the capacity nor the intellect of boys; she should be happy that she is getting any education at all. Her mother’s advice was compatible with the fabricated hadith that women are deficient in both intelligence and religion.

‘This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Is it not true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?’ The women said, ‘Yes.’ he said, ‘This is the deficiency in her religious commitment.’

In spite of the objection of such Islamic thinkers as Al Cahiz (781-868) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), the intellectual deficiency of women caught on in the Islamic tradition. Cahiz claimed that “neither us nor any sound person can say that women are superior to men or inferior” and Averroes, as noted earlier, argued that since women are made of the same stuff as men (*nafs*), women are rational to exactly the same degree.<sup>122</sup>

The Quran never describes women as intellectually deficient. In the Quran, believers are told to reason and to use their common sense—without gender distinction.

In this way, God makes his messages clear to you so that you might use your reason. (Quran 2:242)

No human being can ever attain to faith except by God’s leave, and it is he who lays the loathsome evil upon those who will not use their reason? (Quran 10:100)

Again, verses aimed at believers are never addressed solely to men, but at *all* believers. All believers—men and women alike—are equally equipped by God with the tools necessary for discerning God’s messages and attaining faith. All believers—men and women alike—are equally equipped by God with reason. In the Quran, no verses either assert or imply that women have limited reason.<sup>123</sup>

Finally, and this gets to the heart of Islam, religious responsibility—the acquisition of faith, the understanding of God’s revelation, acting in accord with God’s demands—depends on reason. If women were limited in reason, then their degree of religious responsibility would also have been limited! If it were so, it should be easier for such defective, non-culpably inadequate people to get into Paradise. However, nobody, including those who claim that women are deficient, have continued their argument, saying that due to their deficiencies, women have fewer religious responsibilities.

#### *A Dog, a Donkey, and a Woman*

The same Abu Hurairah astoundingly claims that a prayer may be broken by a dog, a donkey, or a woman if they pass in front of praying people:

The Messenger of God said: “Prayer is broken by a woman, a donkey, and a dog, but something like the back of a saddle protects against that.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Catarina Belo, Some Considerations on Averroes’ Views Regarding Women and Their Role in Society, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol:20, 2009, p.7,8; Averroes’ Commentary on Plato’s Republic, First Treatise, trans. Rosenthal, p. 165.

<sup>123</sup> This is supported by findings in neuroscience as well. The general belief that there are differences in the structures and capacities between the male and female brains is refuted with the results of the studies showing that our brains are the product of the lives we live, experiences we have, and our education, occupations, sports, and hobbies. Being male or female does not have a specific effect Gina Rippon, *How Neuroscience is Exploding the Myth of Male and Female Brains*, *New Scientist*, 28, Feb., 2019; For more information see also Gina Rippon, *The Gendered Brain, The New Neuroscience that Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain*, Penguin Random House, London, 2020.

<sup>124</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, “Salat”, 103, 106; Sahih Muslim, “Salat”, 265; Abu Dawood, “Salat”, 110; Jami` at-Tirmidhi, “Salat”, 253; Nesai, “Kible”, 7.

Women, here and in the tradition, are considered on a par with donkeys and dogs. The association with dogs is especially vicious because, according to some hadiths, black dogs are the Devil himself in disguise.<sup>125</sup> Through this connection, women are more than belittled—they break the prayers of righteous men.

It is said that upon hearing this hadith, Aisha exclaimed:

“Are you likening us to donkeys and dogs?” For God’s sake, many times did the Prophet pray when I was lying between the direction of the Kaaba and Him. In those cases, I would not move so as not to disturb him, and he would still continue praying.”<sup>126</sup>

The Quran, for its part, tells believers— men and women alike, to carry out their ritual prayers with care and reverence. The Quran never states or hints that prayers will be broken if something or someone passes in front of the praying believer.

Hadiths which claim that women are deficient in reason and religion, break prayers, and are the majority in Hell have all been recounted by the same unreliable person: Abu Hurairah. Abu Hurairah was accused of being a liar during his lifetime, was criticized by the Prophet’s wife, and was punished by Caliph Umar. Perhaps, in addition to Abu Hurairah’s tenuous relationship with the truth, he also had psychological problems concerning women. Although we cannot peer into his psyche, we can know, based on the Quran and reason and human nature, that his misogynistic hadiths are fabricated, and have no place in Islam properly understood. Islam properly understood, Islam as given in the authoritative and comprehensive Quran, holds that men and women are equally endowed in reason and religion, entrusted by God to understand the message of the Quran and follow its dictates, hopefully to Paradise.

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<sup>125</sup> Abu Dawood “Salat”, 112.

<sup>126</sup> Sahih Muslim, “Salat”, 270; Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.70.

## CHAPTER 5

### MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY

In the Quran, marriage is portrayed as reciprocal love and compassion between husband and wife:

They are a garment for you, and you are a garment for them. (Quran 2:187)

Marriage, in the Quran, is pictured as God-given tranquility, with husband and wife mutually relating to one another in affection and mercy. The wife “fits” her husband like a perfectly-tuned garment—she encloses him, warms him, shelters him and cares for him; the husband equally “fits” his wife like a garment—he encloses her, warms her, shelters her and cares for her. Compassion-motivated care and mutual concern are the roots of the husband-wife tranquility envisioned in the Quran; God planted love and compassion, we read, out of which tranquility grows and blossoms.

In the years following the death of the Prophet, mutual love and compassion were increasingly replaced by obedience and subservience, and all on the part of the wife. Mutual satisfaction held together by love is replaced by a vicious master-slave hierarchy enforced by punishment (fear). So we see the Quranic ideal of marriage tranquility quickly strangled on such infertile soil.

As Muslim women gradually began to lose their previously granted Quranic rights and equality, women were sequestered in their homes and required to obey their husbands and satisfy their husbands’ desires. Muslim societies began to treat women as slaves to their fathers before marriage and to their husbands after. As alleged “commandments of Islamic law,” women were religiously obliged (pressured) to obey these commandments, resulting in the enslavement of woman by man.

Our unmasking of the roots of this anti-woman mentality showed that the many misogynistic “commandments of Islamic law” regarding marriage and divorce are inauthentic cultural insertions into Islam. As such, the fabricated misogynistic hadiths attributed to the Prophet lack Quranic support.

How, then, did such hateful misconceptions about women gain acceptance as “Islam”?

#### *Marriage and Divorce*

The Quran states that women have the right to marry or divorce of their own free will; women need not, should not, subject their rights to marry or divorce to the will of their fathers or husbands or other male guardians. So, according to the Quran, women and men have equal rights to marriage and divorce. Yet in some Muslim majority countries, women are not allowed to marry the person of their choice, underage girls are forced into marriage with much older men, and women are not allowed to divorce, no matter how miserable their marriages are—and in the name of “Islam.”

While some cultures require securing permission from one’s family to get married, this is not a Quranic requirement. A mature woman, like a mature man, is permitted to decide who she will marry.

Both potential spouses—male and female—can ask the advice of their families, guardians, and friends. Some might, then, decide not to marry because of their family's oppositions. However, the Quran is clear: the decision to marry should be undertaken freely and of one's own accord.

In the Quran, married couples enjoy a God-given tranquility, relating to one another in affection and mercy (Quran 30:21). But such love-drenched tranquility could scarcely attain if the relationship excludes the will of the wife while recognizing only the will of the husband.

Of course, tranquility, affection, and mercy may disappear even in the best of marriages, so husband and wife may decide to separate. Although the continuation of the marriage is the Quranic ideal, the Quran does not prohibit divorce. Sadly, while "Islamic" divorce proceedings in many Muslim majority countries allow a husband to divorce his wife with a simple statement, a woman wishing to divorce her husband must obtain her husband's approval for divorce (*khul*).<sup>127</sup> In this system, a woman will face great difficulties in gaining her husband's approval, and most of the time, she will have to forfeit great amounts of money and property to purchase her freedom. In these sorts of situations, the husband has the right to reject the amount offered and to request a much higher payment. If the woman cannot convince her husband to divorce through "*khul*," then the case ends up in a tribunal (usually of men), which she has to convince of her grievances. This can take years; during this time, the wife is often forced to live a miserable life.

Although the Quran does not grant the right to divorce only to husbands, many Muslims nonetheless claim that women have no right to divorce. Let us remember once again that everything that is not forbidden in the Quran is permitted. So since the Quran does not forbid women from divorcing their husbands, women are permitted to do so. That is, women have the right to divorce their husbands.<sup>128</sup>

### The Bridal Gift (*Mahr*)

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<sup>127</sup> *Khul/Muhalea*; While the literal meaning of the word *khul* is to "remove a dress, undress; separate," within the context of canonical jurisprudence it is used to describe the way a woman ends her matrimonial ties by paying her husband a certain amount to convince him to grant the divorce. Since it requires a mutual agreement, this process is called *muhalea*. See Fahrettin Atar, "Muhalea," *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, XXX, 399.

<sup>128</sup> Some use the expression "the man in whose hand is the marriage contract foregoes it" in the following verse to prove that only men have the right to divorce:

If you divorce them before having sexual intercourse with them, but you have already agreed to the bridal gift (*mahr*), give them half of what you specified unless they forego the right or the man in whose hand is the marriage contract foregoes it. But to forego is nearer to piety. And do not forget generosity between one another. God is seeing everything you do. (Quran 2:237)

However, this verse is not about the right to divorce but the payment of the bridal gift (*mahr*), which a future husband pays to his future wife. The verse says that if a couple divorces before the consummation of the marriage, half the agreed bridal gift (*mahr*) must be paid to the woman. Moreover, the woman has the freedom to forego this amount if she wishes. Since the discussion here is the bridal gift (*mahr*) paid by the man, then "the man in whose hand is the marriage contract" should be interpreted as the man in whose hand the "bridal gift" (*mahr*) is not the right to divorce, which is not mentioned in the verse at all.

While a bridal gift (*mahr*) is required of all Islamic marriages, a dowry is not. Payments are made to the bride from the groom. The bridal gift (*mahr*) is a form of wealth-creation for the bride, establishing the woman's financial independence. If the husband were to divorce the wife, she would be able to keep her bridal gift.

During the greater part of history, many women who wish to divorce because of mistreatment or incompatibility continue with their marriages for fear of being impoverished. To save women from the devastating consequences of impoverishment, the Quran introduced a bridal-gift system in which the husband pays a bridal gift to his future wife upon marriage; the woman, then, can do whatever she wishes with her bridal gift. The bridal gift strengthens the economic condition of women, preventing financial oppression within marriage and impoverishment upon divorce.

Yet Salma Khalil did not want a large bridal gift before her wedding. She loved her fiancé, Ahmad, and did not think that they would ever divorce. But, since Ahmad had the resources, her grandmother insisted on a three-bedroom apartment for her granddaughter's bridal gift. But Salma felt ashamed by the request. Talking about financial matters before her wedding seemed inappropriate to her; it cheapened their commitment somehow. But her grandmother insisted. As the oldest person in the family, no one wanted to upset her. So a three-bedroom apartment was set as Salma's bridal gift. Years later, after they had two children, Salma and Ahmad did decide to get a divorce. During the difficult divorce process, Salma came to understand the value of her bridal gift. Because she had stayed at home to raise her children, she was grateful for her wise grandmother's insistence on a three-bedroom apartment.

The Quran commands a bridal gift:

And give the women [upon marriage] their [bridal] gifts (*mahr*) graciously. But if they give up willingly to you anything of it, then take it in satisfaction and ease (Quran 4:4).

Determining the amount of the bridal gift is central to a marriage's reciprocal agreement. Since the Quran does not specify the contents of the bridal gift or its material value, it may be a modest present like a ring, or something extremely valuable, like a house. If an agreement cannot be reached, the marriage contract may be stalemated.

Since marrying couples are not thinking about divorce, they often ignore the future financial ramifications of it. In many societies talking about money is considered indecent before marriage. The woman is the loser given such delicacies. The husband, who holds all the financial power, gains the advantage from such ignorance and propriety. And women with little financial power often find themselves disadvantaged at the outset. By introducing the bridal gift at the very start of a marriage, making it obligatory, and leaving decisions about its amount to the bride and the groom, the Quran aims at guaranteeing the financial wellbeing of the woman both during the marriage and after divorce.

Since it is paid directly to the women, the bride gains much-needed financial security. Moreover, Quranic bridal gift practices confirm that women have the right to own and manage property. Since the bride, not her family, receives the bridal gift, she is fully in control of that which belongs to her.

### *Male Superiority*

Male superiority was introduced into Islam with fabricated hadiths and misinterpretations of some Quranic verses. Quran 2.228 is a good example. In a discussion of a three-month waiting period for a woman to remarry after a divorce, we read, “husbands have a degree (*daraja*) over them...” While the text clearly refers to former husbands, over the years, “former husband” has been taken to refer to men in general; and while “them” clearly refers to former wives, it is taken to refer to women in general. The verse thus transmogrified into “men have rights/authority over women,” degenerating into a proof-text for the superiority of men over women.

But one cannot understand the *daraja* (rights, authority) over “them” without reading it in its context. The complete verse is as follows:

Divorced women shall wait by themselves for three menstruation periods. And it is not lawful for them to conceal what God has created in their wombs if they believe in God and the Last Day. Meanwhile, their husbands (*buletu-hunne*) have the better right to take them back if they desire reconciliation. And women have rights similar to their obligations, according to what is fair. But men have a degree (*daraja*) over them. God is Mighty and Wise. (Quran 2:228)

When read in the context of the verses preceding and following the above verse, we see that the issue taken up is divorce: “*buletu-hunne*” refers to the former husbands of divorced women. Moreover, “them” refers to recently divorced women who find themselves in a waiting period (*iddet*)—the period following a divorce in which a woman cannot marry. So rather than speaking of men and women in general, the text speaks very specifically of recently divorced husbands and their recently divorced wives (in the waiting period before they can lawfully remarry). In context, the verse resists any general conclusions about the general and superior authority of men over women. Again, in context, the text speaks only of recently divorced women and their recently divorced husbands.

According to the Quran, women must wait for three menstruation cycles for their divorce to be finalized<sup>129</sup> (Quran 33:49). After this period, if a woman is not pregnant, the marriage is over. If the recently divorced woman is pregnant, she must wait until the birth of the baby to finalize her new marriage (Quran 65:4). A divorced woman cannot marry another man during her waiting period (*iddet*); at the end of this period, she is free to marry if she so wishes. This practice prevents confusions on child’s paternity.

While a recently divorced woman cannot marry another man during the waiting period, she *can* remarry her former husband. This permission grants a “priority” (*daraja*) to the divorced husband with respect to marrying his former wife; he is granted a priority, *not over his former wife* but over other men.

Why might recently divorced husbands have a right over other men to their former wives? The

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<sup>129</sup> In cases when there has been no sexual intercourse between the couples during the marriage, women do not have to wait at all.

Quran's preference is that the biological father raise his child within the context of a two-parent marriage. This right encourages both husband and wife to give their marriage another chance. But granting a marital priority to the former husband to remarry his wife (assuming both concur) does not support the superiority of men over women in general. Indeed, the verse is simply reaffirming the sanctity of marriage, especially when children are involved. It is better, the Quran is saying, if both biological parents raise children within the context of a tranquil marriage.

### *Husband as Guardian*

Certain expressions in Quran 4:34 are important for understanding claims concerning relations between husband and wife.

Men are the protectors and maintainers (*qawwamune*) of women, as God has given some of them an advantage (*faddala*) over others, (*ala badin*) because they spend out of their wealth abundantly. The good women are obedient, guarding what God would have them guard. As for those from whom you suffer from discord, advise them, abandon them in their beds, and separate them; if they obey you sincerely, seek no way against them. God is sublime, Great. (Quran 4:34)

Some claim that *qawwam* implies men's superiority over women, translating the text in a way that indicates a hierarchical relation between husband and wife. For example, Mohammed Ali says, "It is not permissible for a wife to disobey her husband's orders. She has to obey him and execute his orders and has to prepare food for him." Noor Mohammed says, "The wife must obey her husband. A virtuous woman is a woman who pleases her husband, obeys him when he gives orders." And Mohammed Al-Kaneeny says, "In Islam, if a woman does not obey her husband, she is called rebellious. If her mistreatment is proved, she can get a divorce by giving up all her rights".

People like Mohammed Ali, Noor Mohammed, and Mohammed Al-Kaneeny, and many more claim that men are in a superior position of authority over women because God has advantaged men and disadvantaged women. They believe that these advantages, built into the nature of each man and each woman, give men the right to control and demand obedience from their wives. And, if the woman should not obey, the Quran requires the man to beat (strike, scourge, etc.) the woman until she submits, as she should, to the superior man.

These biased translations provide constant reminders that all translations are interpretations, often reflecting the prejudices of their (male) translators. A more careful analysis of the Arabic, within the context of the entire Quran, would preclude such tendentious and women-harming interpretations. Let us take our analysis term by term.

*Qawwam* derives from the root *qaim*, which means "to stand," is also used in a financial sense. For example, 4:5 of the Quran states:

Do not give the immature your money which God has entrusted to you for support (*qiyamen*). But provide for them from it, and clothe them, and speak to them with kind words. (Quran 4:5)

Quran 4:5 says that God has handed the financial responsibility of the immature over to certain

responsible people who support (*qiyamen*) and provide for them. The point seems to be that since the immature are incapable of handling their own money, God assigns people to care for them financially.

A financial understanding of *qiyamen* in 4:34 is required because we read that God demands that men abundantly spend out of their wealth. So, in 4:34, *qawwammüne* is best understood as “supporting financially, guarding financially:” men, who have the means, should financially support their wives. In context, it does not mean the men are in charge of women or are by nature better than women. It affirms that during the Prophet’s time, since men were considerably more economically advantaged than women, they had the obligation to financially support their wives.

Muhammed Asad, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim theologian, interprets *qawwamüne* in 4:34 in a financial sense; it does not support the hierarchical superiority of men over women. Also, Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a well known Egyptian author, educator, and Islamic theorist, confirms that this verse should be read in the light of the conjugal institution and affirms that it refers to financial responsibility. Mohammad Abduh says that the *qawwamüne* accorded to the husband is not because he is a man; rather, it is based on his (contingent and cultural) ability to acquire financial resources for his household.<sup>130</sup> Al-Tabari (839-923), an early Islamic historian and Quran interpreter, also reads the verse as referring to men’s financial duties vis-à-vis women and not to their ontological status.<sup>131</sup>

Interpreting *qawwamüne* as “men’s superiority” or “head of the family” ignores the context of the term entirely. It is saying this: in the male-dominated culture of the day, one which economically favored men over women, men should financially support women.

Such expressions point more to social and economic realities than to ontological status. If men are economically advantaged, which they were then and often are today, they are economically responsible for sharing their wealth with their family. But if the economic needs of a family can be satisfied by a woman but not by a man, then the woman would be *qawwam* in that family. And if both the woman and the man can satisfy these economic needs, both will be *qawwam*. Since the verse assigns *qawwam* to those in better financial conditions, whoever satisfies those conditions will be *qawwam*. Whomever God has granted financial advantage is *qawwam* and must generously share their wealth with their family.

### *Obedience*

According to the Quran, obedience to God is our highest good. The Quran requires obedience to God and God alone. Throughout the Quran, *qanete* means “obedience,” “submission,” or “devotion” to God:

Guard your prayers, and the middle prayer, and stand before God in devotion (*qanite*). (Quran 2:238)

They are the patient, and the truthful, and the reverent (*qanite*), and the charitable, and the seekers of forgiveness at dawn. (Quran 3:17)

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<sup>130</sup> Asma Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Quran*, trans: Muneera Salem-Murdock, Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2018, p.125.

<sup>131</sup> Asma Barlas, *The Believing Women in Islam*, p.187.

Abraham was indeed an exemplary vanguard in his submission (*qaniten*) to God, a monotheist who never worshiped idols. (Quran 16:120)

And Mary, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her womb, and so We breathed into her of Our Spirit, and she believed in the truth of her Lord's Words and his Books and was one of the devout (*qanitine*). (Quran 66:12)

Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women (*qanitati*), truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, men who guard their chastity, women who guard their chastity, men who remember God frequently and women who remember God frequently- God has prepared for them a pardon and an immense reward. (Quran 33:35)

*Qanitine/qanitinen/qanitati* describes people who obey God, are devoted to God, remember God, submit to God, and stand before and with God.

However, some claim that *qanitatun* in 4:34 requires women to obey their husbands based on this portion of the text:

The good (*salihatu*) women are obedient (*qanitatun*), guarding what God would have them, guard.

But *qanitatun*<sup>132</sup>, which derives from the root *qanete*, means "to submit," "to obey," expressing a strong and sincere loyalty and obedience. The verse says, "good (*salihatu*) women are *qanitatun*." So the important question is: Does the good woman obey her husband or God?

Again, taking the Quran as a whole, *obedience to God*, not one's husband, makes a woman good. As such, *qanitat* in 4:34 must mean obedience *to God* (not to a husband). After all, unlike God, a husband might demand inappropriate behavior; sheer obedience to her husband would not make a woman good. So the good woman of 4:34 is faithfully obedient to God, guarding, as the verse says, what God demands of her.

### *Wife-Beating*

In the preceding two chapters, we focused on the first half of 4:34. The interpretation of the second half of the verse is likewise historically problematic.

Domestic violence is surprisingly common around the world; be it a Western country or a Muslim majority one. Statistics show that 1 in 3 women experience some form of physical violence by an intimate partner.<sup>133</sup> But there is a difference in understanding between cultures on domestic violence. In Western culture, men have no right to beat women. When men beat up their wives, it is wrong.

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<sup>132</sup> If we interpret "*qanitat*" as obedience "to husband," then how shall we interpret 33:35, which mentions not just "obedient women" (*qanitati*) but also "obedient men" (*qanitine*). If we were to interpret this obedience as the one owed by one gender to the other, then would not the "obedient men" mentioned in 33:35 also refer to the obedience owed by men to their wives? No theologian has attributed this erroneous meaning to that word, but part of the same theologians claimed that what was meant in 4:34 was the "obedience owed by a woman to her husband." We once more witness the effect of the gender of theologians and of canonical law and hadith experts that happen to be all men.

<sup>133</sup> National Statistics, [ncadv.org/statistics](http://ncadv.org/statistics).

But in Islamic culture, by misinterpreting a Quranic verse, men claim that God has given them the right to beat their wives. This belief is common among women as well. Sabiya Farhan, for example, says that the man has to beat his wife to discipline her if she is mistaken or if she rejects sleeping with him. But, she cautions, the beating must be soft, nothing like torture. Zahra El Houssine says that a man can beat his wife if she does anything wrong (like not pleasing God or him) because a wife must obey her husband. Noor Mohammed adds, "In Islam, there are steps that a husband can follow to punish his wife. For example, he forsakes her in the bed, which means sleeping beside her but not talk to her or not having sex with her. If his wife still persists and does not obey him, he can use the last solution, which is a non-intense beating. Since Islam is the only religion that guards women's rights, it considers the beating solution as the most aggressive way in case it is needed."

The tradition of seeing wife-beating as a Quranic right given to men is based on a mistranslation such as:

But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them (*vadribu-hunne*).

Many claim that this verse permits husbands to beat their wives. However, in fidelity to the Arabic, the passage is better translated as:

As for those from whom you suffer of discord/separation (*nushuze-hunne*), advise them, abandon them in their beds, and separate (*vadribu-hunne*) them; if they obey you, seek no way against them.

The debate over the permission to beat one's wife concerns just two words: *nushuz* and *daraba*. Let's focus on *nushuz* first.

While we translated *nushuz* as "discord/separation," it is generally understood as a kind of disobedience or disloyalty. So, if one's wife is disobedient or disloyal, according to this general understanding, he can beat her. Is such a translation faithful to the entire scope of the Quran?

We see *nushuz* used for men in the same surah, 4:128:

If a woman fears discord/separation (*nushuzen*) or estrangement from her husband, then there is no sin for them to reconcile between themselves, and reconciling is good. Souls are prone to jealousy and selfishness, yet if you do what is good, and beware, God is Cognizant of what you do. (Quran 4:128)

Suppose *nushuz* does mean "disloyalty." According to Quran 4:3, a woman or a disloyal man (that is, is an adulterer or adulteress) cannot get married and, if married, must be divorced by her/his spouse. But Quran 4:128 commends reconciliation, not divorce. Indeed, none of the Quranic references to *nushuz* mentions divorce. We can safely conclude, then, that in 4:128, as in the rest of the Quran, *nushuz* does not mean disloyalty.

*Nushuz* can also mean "stand up" as in 58:11:

O you who believe! When you are told to make room (*enshuzu*) in your gatherings, make room (*enshuzu*); God will make room for you. And when you are told to disperse, disperse so that God elevates those among you who believe, and those given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you

do. (Quran 58:11)

The Prophet's friends are told to "make room," in other words, to "stand up (*nushuz*) and change place."

So, taking the Quran as a whole, the word *nushuz* means both "standing up to change place" and "discord."

Therefore, in the context of Quran 4:128, *nushuz* likely means something like "changing marital status" (where discord has caused one spouse to "stand up and move"). So, 4:128 is saying that when a spouse fears the other's discord/separation, both should work towards reconciliation, working together for the peace that keeps marriages together and flourishing.

Let us now return to Quran 4:34:

As for those from whom you suffer of discord/separation (*nushuze-hunne*), advise them, abandon them in their beds, and separate (*va-dribu-hunne*) them; if they obey you, seek no way against them.

Following the general impetus of the Quran, we take *nushuz* to mean, as seen in the above verses, discord/separation (not, as often construed, as disloyalty or disagreement). Moreover, in the text, there is no gradual escalation of steps from admonishment to separation of beds to beatings (again, which you find in many translations). Moreover, following the impetus of the Quran, we read this passage in the context of reconciliation, not punishment, of working together for the peace that keeps marriages together and flourishing. Indeed, the following verse (4:35) recommends additional solutions for the discord: arbiters, representing the husband and wife, can help them to reconcile. Taken together, Quran 4:34-35 offer a set of recommendations for achieving marital reconciliation. Each person is free to choose what they believe will work best since in the verse, there is no gradual succession in the options, and spouses can follow any of the alternatives in a very flexible way.

The most controversial term of this verse, of course, is *daraba*, which has been widely translated as "beating." However, "separating spaces" is a much more faithful translation. *Daraba*, as you might expect, has several meanings in Arabic, ranging from "leaving a place and embarking on a trip" to "beating." Its more than fifty occurrences in the Quran reflect these very different meanings.

In most languages, a word can have different meanings. For example, the word "nail" in English can mean both the hard part on the tip your fingers and sharp metal pieces used in construction and, idiomatically, the offering harsh criticism ("we nailed him to the wall"). We can understand the meanings of such ambiguous words only by looking at the immediate context in which they are used. If the immediate context fails to clarify the meanings, the next step is to look at the overall context—the text in its entirety—and then decide on the most appropriate meaning. Let us now apply this method to *daraba* in the 4:34.

Let us suppose that the immediate context—which speaks so clearly of reconciliation and justice—is ambiguous. This is a big claim. It is hard to imagine how beating one's wife, in an already troubled marriage, could possibly conduce to reconciliation. While such punishments may cause the wife to fear leaving her husband, they scarcely conduce to the marriage described in the Quran as giving tranquility,

relating to one another in affection and mercy (Quran 30:21).

Let us turn, then, to other passages in the Quran in which *daraba* or its variants occur. In Quran 37:93, *daraba* clearly means “to strike”:

Then he turned on them, striking (*darben*) with his right hand.

It frequently means “giving an example:”

God does not shy away from giving an example (*yadribe*) of a mosquito or anything above it... (Quran 2:26).

*Daraba* also means “withhold” or “keeping away:”

Shall We keep away (*nadribu*) the reminder from you, because you are a transgressing people? (Quran 43:5).

And *daraba* frequently means “leaving a place, embarking on a trip, moving away”:

When you travel (*darabtum*) in the land, there is no blame on you for shortening the prayers, if you fear that the disbelievers may harm you. The disbelievers are your manifest enemies. (Quran 4:101)

In summary, *daraba* in the Quran can mean both “striking/beating” and “distancing the spaces between.” However, when *daraba* means “striking,” it never describes one person hitting another; indeed, the Quran forbids personal vengeance. Moreover, when one person hits another, different words are used: *wakazehu* for when Moses hit an enemy (Quran 28.15), and *sakkat* for Abraham’s wife hitting her face with her hand (Quran 51.29).

In addition, we read that Quran 24:6-9 does not permit husbands to physically abuse their wives even if they have caught them in the act of adultery. So, rather than thinking that 4:34 approves a husband’s beating his wife in a case of discord, we should think that it proposes distancing the spaces between the couple before a divorce.<sup>134</sup> But, again, if one reads 4:35 immediately after 4:34, one will see clearly that the Quran endorses reconciliation over a divorce.

Since the Prophet himself is always our best example, we can look at his life as well for how to understand Quran 4:34. In Quran 33:28, God advised the Prophet to divorce his wives (not beat them) if they are pursuing “worldly lives and its vanities”. The Quran advises more generally that Muslims should act praiseworthy (*maruf*), both in marriage and in divorce (Quran 65:2). So, rather than prescribing violent punishment of the wife in cases of marital discord, *daraba* should be interpreted as creating a distance between husband and wife (always with the hope of reconciliation).<sup>135</sup>

### *Sexual Slaves*

As expected of hadiths constructed by men who assert that women’s obedience to their husbands is a religious obligation, we find hadiths constructed by men who assert women’s complete submission also

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<sup>134</sup> Kuran Arařtırmaları Grubu, *Uydurulan Din ve Kuran’daki Din*, p.247-248.

<sup>135</sup> Kuran Arařtırmaları Grubu, *Uydurulan Din ve Kuran’daki Din*, p.247.

on sexual matters. The following hadiths are attributed to the Prophet:

“The Messenger of God said: I swear to God that if a woman does not comply when a man calls her to his bed for sexual intercourse, God will make her suffer until the husband is satisfied.”<sup>136</sup>

We read in Abu Hurairah: “The Messenger of God said: If a man calls his wife to his bed, and she refuses, and he spends the night angry with her, the angels will curse her until morning.”<sup>137</sup> And in some canonical jurisprudence texts “marriage” is defined in the following way: “Marriage is an agreement reached between man and woman that enables man to benefit from woman.”<sup>138</sup> Saeed Aiad believes that women must be fully obedient towards their husband’s sexual desires because of the hadith that says, “All the angels will curse a woman if she does not satisfy her husband in bed.” Amira Al Mutairi affirms a hadith which says if a wife angers her husband, the angels keep cursing her until the morning. Hussein Yassin also says that a wife’s duty is to satisfy her husband; otherwise, he would have the right to satisfy his desires somewhere else.

Contrary to these statements in hadith literature and canonical jurisprudence, the Quran defines relations between spouses as mutually “giving tranquility to each other.” Compare the tender and mutually affirming sentiments of the Quran with the vicious and male-centric sentiments of the above hadith:

From His signs is that He created for you mates out of your kind so that you may reside with them, and He placed between you affection and compassion. In that are signs for people who think! (Quran 30: 21)

Permitted for you is intercourse with your wives on the night of the fast. They are a garment for you, and you are a garment for them... (Quran 2:187)

Marital relationships, in the Quran, are marked by love, compassion, and mutual respect. The Quran elegantly describes, in the context of intercourse, each spouse welcoming and warming the other like a custom-made garment. Each satisfies the other—tranquility. The Quranic marriage ideal then is a mutually respectful, mutually loving, heaven-like tranquility.

The hadiths above, however, reek of punishment and power and coercion. Instead of the attractive power of compassion and respect of which the Quran speaks, the hadiths speak of compulsion and anger and (the man’s) benefit. The hadiths elevate the man and the man’s pleasure, all the while denigrating the woman and the woman’s pleasure. Punishment is possible only for the woman, which God himself inflicts.

Such vicious hadiths are at the root of the hadith’s deepest problems—they were constructed by selfish men who would debase our noble religion to satisfy their wishes and desires. The power of these vicious fabrications is increased by false attribution to the Prophet.

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<sup>136</sup> Muslim, “Nikah,” 121.

<sup>137</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, “Bedü’l-halk,” 7; Muslim, “Nikah,” 122; Abu Dawood, “Nikah,” 41.

<sup>138</sup> Mehmet Okuyan, *Kadına Yönelik Şiddete Kur’an’ın Bakışı*, p.110.

But Islam properly understood and fully informed by the Quran, does not view the wife solely as a means to her husbands' pleasure (under fear of punishment). The Quran, rather, sees marriage as a tranquil place for husband and wife alike, built upon mutual respect and compassion.

### *Paradise and Approval of Husband*

According to Islam, one must, first and foremost, submit to God and obey God's commandments. Every Islamic denomination without exception approves of this fundamental belief. And the Quran is clear—gaining God's approval based on one's submission and obedience to God is the sole basis of securing one's place in Paradise. However, some hadiths claim that a woman will go to Heaven if she wins the approval of her husband. Consider the following hadiths:

"A woman who dies with the approval of her husband shall enter Paradise."<sup>139</sup>

Conditioning a woman's entry into Paradise on her husband's approval, would mean the enslavement of women to their husbands. According to another hadith recounted by Ibn Abbas, the Prophet said,

"Shall I tell you the most precious luck a person can have: A good wife; when her husband looks at her, she makes him happy, when he orders something she obeys and when her husband goes away she keeps her virtue."<sup>140</sup>

While having an obedient wife may be precious luck for a man, it can be vicious luck for a woman. Husbands can be difficult to please; some mistreat their wives. Such husbands may never be satisfied with their wives, no matter what they do. Conditioning a women's chances of going to Paradise on any husband's satisfaction is contrary to the Quran, reason, and human nature. The only good Muslim—male and female alike—is the one who pleases Allah:

O, men! We have created you all out of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all aware. (Quran 49:13)

### *Child Marriage*

Every year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18.<sup>141</sup> Although practiced around the world, Islamic provisions are often appealed to when the issue is child marriage. In Nigeria, for example, even though it is banned, 17% of the girls in the country as a whole and 48% of the girls in the Muslim-dominated regions are married before the age of 15.<sup>142</sup> In Iraq, girls can get married at the age of nine since, it is alleged, the Prophet married Aisha when she was 9. Hassan Ali complains about Egyptian laws which forbid underage

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<sup>139</sup> Jami' at-Tirmidhi, "Rada'," 10; Ibn Majah "Nikah," 4.

<sup>140</sup> Abu Dawood, "Zekat," 32.

<sup>141</sup> Child Marriage around the World, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/>.

<sup>142</sup> Nigeria: Child Brides Facing Death Sentences a Decade after Child Marriage Prohibited, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/11/the-tragedy-of-nigerias-child-brides>.

marriages because, he says, Islam grants permission for early age marriages. Adapting laws other than *sharia* law is blasphemy according to him and must be punished.

On the other hand, Imama Zahid tells her story as a victim of underage marriage, “When my father passed away, I was young and my mother re-married. She was not getting on well with her new husband, thus forced me to marry when I was 12 to a 32 years old man. The first years were like a nightmare. But then I got children and got used to living with misery. I do not know what happiness is.”

The claim that Islam permits the marriage of underage girls, based partly on the practice of the Prophet, is a widely held misconception. This view is based on fabricated, women-denigrating hadiths.

For example, a hadith claims that the Prophet married Aisha when she was six and consummated the marriage when she was nine. The claim to underage marriage is also based on a misconception of the Quran. However, a careful and unprejudiced reading of these relevant verses will show that the Quran does not approve of child marriage; indeed, the Quran firmly opposes child marriage.

The proof-text for child marriage in the Quran is:

Test the orphans until they reach the age of marriage (*iza belagu en-nikaha*). If you find them to be mature enough (*rushden*), hand over their properties to them. And do not consume it extravagantly or hastily before they grow up. The wealthy guardian shall not charge any wage, but the poor guardian may charge equitably. When you give them their properties, you shall have witnesses. God suffices as Reckoner. (Quran 4:6)

This verse prudently instructs us not to give the properties of orphans to them until they reach the “age of marriage” (*iza belagu en-nikaha*), that is, until they are mature enough to dispose of their properties responsibly and have attained to mental maturity (*rushd*). The Quran sets a parameter—the “marriage age”—to prevent marrying before that age, to those who are not mature enough to dispose of the properties responsibly (let alone get married). Although the Quran does not mention the specific age for marriage, this expression is sufficient to warn against underage marriages. The term *rushd* (mental maturity) suggests another criterion that must be met before returning the property to orphans. So to responsibly care for their property, orphans must reach both the “age of marriage” and “mental maturity.”

Since the institution of marriage also has a financial aspect, the bride-to-be must be mentally mature enough to determine the proper amount of her bridal gift (*mahr*). This is no small matter—she must be mentally mature enough to choose her husband freely, to determine what resources she might need to govern a home, and, if divorced, to calculate what she will require financially in the far off future. Such matters cannot be entrusted to someone who has not attained mental maturity. It is wrong, according to the Quran, to force someone who lacks mental maturity to discuss and decide on such matters. So the claim that Islam approves of child marriage is roundly rejected by 4:6 in the Quran. A child, who has neither reached the age of marriage nor attained mental maturity, can be forced into marriage only in clear violation of the Quran.

Attempts to legitimize marriage with underage girls have also been made possible by

misinterpreting to the following verse:

As for those of your women (*nisa*) who have reached menopause, if you have any doubts, their waiting term shall be three months and also for those who do not menstruate (*lem yahidne*). As for those who are pregnant, their term shall be until they give birth. Whoever fears God- he will make things easy for him. (Quran 65:4)

Some translate the expression “who do not menstruate” (*lem yahidne*) in this verse as “who have not yet menstruated” thus claimed that this verse says that girls, who have not yet menstruated, can get married. Note well: the verse does include the term “yet.” In Arabic, “*lem ma*,” not “*lem*,” means “yet.” So “*lem yahidne*” means “who do not menstruate” means something like “women who do not menstruate as a general condition.” Such women should wait three months in cases of a divorce. Finally, *nisa* means “women”, not “young girls.” When the Arabic is clarified, the verse clearly addresses women who do not menstruate, *not* young girls who have not yet menstruated.

To be completely clear, the Quran permits marriage only for those who have both reached the age of marriage and attained mental maturity. Girls and boys who lack both attributes cannot get married.

So hadiths that claim that the Prophet married to Aisha when she was six also contradict this clear teaching of the Quran. Since the Prophet was both the preacher and enforcer of the Quran, it is unthinkable that he would behave contrary to the Quran’s orders.

Such a vile hadith likely arose from some man who had wanted to legitimize (by implicating the Prophet) his marriage to an underage girl.

The Quran rejects the underage marriage of girls. That’s as clear as we can say it. According to the Quran, only those who have attained both the “age of marriage” and “mental maturity” can get married. Moreover, it claims that the Prophet married a six-year-old girl slander the Prophet. It is inconceivable that the Prophet, who enjoined people to live according to the Quran and who lived himself accordingly, should have acted so blatantly contrary to the Quran.

### *Polygamy*

The Quran addresses issues that people face in very different ways at very different times and in very different cultures and social structures. 21<sup>st</sup>-century modern industrial society is very different from a 7<sup>th</sup>-century agricultural society. Times of war are very different from times of peace, times of plenty different from times of famine or drought, etc, etc. So the Quran speaks very broadly and simply, leaving a great deal to each person to discern and direct its application to his or her particular time, place, and circumstance. Polygamy is one of the issues which may and even should be interpreted differently from time to time, society to society and culture to culture.

Although Islam is often the primary target of criticism when polygamy is discussed, polygamous marriages has been practiced widely in many different times, civilizations, and religious traditions, including in the Hebrew Bible. Other polygamous cultures can be found in the ancient Near East, ancient China, sub-Saharan Africa (it is practiced today within Christian-majority countries like Congo) and Mormon

communities. Polygamy, then, is a cross-cultural historical institution rather than an exclusively Islamic aberration.

There are, as might be expected, many misconceptions about polygamy in Islam. These misconceptions are typically due to misunderstanding the differences between “commandments,” “recommendations,” “prohibitions,” and “permissions” in the Quran. For example, ritual prayers are *commandments* of Islam and, as such, place a moral and religious demand on every Muslim. Giving alms in secrecy is a *recommendation*; it is encouraged but not required. Drinking alcohol is a *prohibition*—no Muslim should consume alcohol. On the other hand, eating spaghetti or jelly fish are not prohibited. They fall within the category of the permissible, and whether a person chooses to eat them or not is a matter of personal preference.

While polygamous marriage in Islam may also be placed within the category of the legally permissible, the matter is more complex than typical “permissible” acts *because the Quran does not present polygamy in a morally or socially neutral way*. The Quran explicitly ties polygamy to fairness between the wives, on the one hand, and then noting, on the other, that full fairness can never be truly achieved between wives:

You will not be able to be fair regarding the women even if you make every effort; so do not totally incline towards one leaving the other hanging in a void. If you reconcile and be aware, the God is Forgiving and Compassionate. (Quran 4,129)

As such, although polygamy is not categorically forbidden, the Qur’an’s strong ethical qualifications on polygamy entail that it cannot reasonably be understood as a recommended or ideal model of marriage. Monogamy is always the Islamic ideal, with polygamy a distant but permitted second best (and always and only under certain very strict conditions).

Consider a verse that is often claimed to permit polygamy:

“If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans, then marry those women who are lawful for you: two, three, or four. But if you fear that you cannot maintain justice, then marry only one, or those whom your right hands possess. That is more suitable so that you do not commit injustice.” *Qur’an 4:3*

While this verse is often cited in favor of amorous men holding multiple wives, its context is restricted to orphans. So, the verse before reads:

“Give the orphans their property when they reach maturity. Do not replace the good with the bad, and do not consume their property by mixing it with your own. Indeed, that is a grave sin.” *Qur’an 4:2*

In order to understand this verse properly, we must first comprehend the meaning of the word “orphan” in Arabic. “*Yatīm*” (orphan) is not restricted to a person whose parents have died; it may also be used in a broader sense for a vulnerable woman whose husband has died or widowed who may be in need of protection.

Now we can see that Qur’an 4:2 is a dire warning to men who sought to marry vulnerable women with the intention of exploiting them. The verse is, in effect, cautioning against the attitude of the selfish man

who thinks: “Let me marry this orphan woman merely to seize her wealth, then take other wives for my own pleasure, while leaving the woman whose property I have exploited neglected and abandoned” (reflecting a practice that was quite common in the Arabian peninsula at that time). So when Qur’an 4:3 says that a man may marry two, three, or four women, it goes on to condemn marrying vulnerable orphan women for exploitative purpose.

To be sure, the necessary condition for polygamy is, always, justice. A husband must esteem and treat both wives as he does (or should) his favorite wife. If he cannot treat them with equal respect and dignity, then he should stick with one wife (“if you fear that you will not be able to maintain justice, then marry only one”). The difficulty, neigh impossibility, of being fair within a polygamous marriage is keenly recognized:

“You will never be able to deal justly between wives, however much you may desire it. So do not incline completely toward one and leave another suspended.” *Qur’an* 4:129

This verse draws the matter to a close by stating that, however much one may strive, one will never be able to achieve complete fairness between wives. Taking 4.3 and 4.1239 together, the message becomes clear: since you cannot maintain justice, marry only one (the Islamic ideal).

We find similar moral qualifications on the Qur’anic treatment of slavery as well. Suppose you ask the following: Does the Qur’an explicitly prohibit slavery? Is owning a slave declared “haram”? The answer is “No”, at least not in an immediate and categorical legal sense. But a process of moral qualification is clearly at work in the Quran’s understanding of slavery. For example, Quran 47:4 prohibits keeping war prisoners, both male and female, as slaves. The verse tells the believers to “...either release them graciously or for ransom...” to prevent the acquisition of new slaves into the system. At the same time, by encouraging the emancipation of existing slaves in a number of expiatory contexts the Quran aims at the eventual elimination of slavery.<sup>143</sup>

In a similar way, the Qur’an’s discourse on polygamy should be understood as moving toward elimination rather than endorsement. By making polygamy conditional upon justice, and then stating that full justice between wives can never truly be achieved, the text places polygamy under a serious moral limitation: “*You will never be able to deal justly between wives, however much you may desire it*” (Qur’an 4:129).

At the same time, the final decision remains with those who choose to enter into a polygamous marriage. So long as all parties consent, it still remains within the sphere of the legally permissible. Yet it is neither the recommended nor ideal model in the Qur’anic, committed and egalitarian monogamy is the ideal. This

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<sup>143</sup> The American experience of abolition shows that the formal ending of slavery, by itself, does not automatically produce real freedom. When slavery was abolished in the United States, many formerly enslaved people remained trapped in plantation-like labor relations because they lacked land, income, and legal protection. This demonstrates that deeply rooted institutions cannot be dismantled in a meaningful way without also transforming the social and economic structures that sustain them. In this sense, the Qur’anic approach may be understood as morally directing society toward the eventual abolition of slavery through a gradual transformation of the system that nourished it.

is also consistent with the well-known report that the Prophet did not permit his son-in-law Ali to take another wife while his daughter Fatima was still alive, which suggests that even where something may fall within the legally permissible.

According to the Quran, polygamy is permissible because, in certain circumstances, polygamy can ensure the flourishing of needy women. For example, in societies with a dearth of males as a result of wars or other calamities, polygamy ensures the survival of those societies and prevents women from being destitute. Even in such cases, polygamy is neither a commandment nor a recommendation, but it is permitted and could be a good choice for the people involved. It is naïve and anachronistic to expect all cultures at all times to be shaped according to the standards of the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-industrial societies. It is wrong to criticize Islamic permissions through the lens of this own particular culture and time frame.

It may, of course, be a great good for an impoverished orphan in a society with a dearth of economically advantaged males to enter into a polygamous marriage. It may be her only economic hope. But the Quran's strict rules, favoring as always justice and equality, would prevent the preying of opportunistic men upon such desperate women.

So, again, although polygamy is permitted in Islam, it is not promoted. Precautions and qualifications for being fair in polygamous marriages have been suggested to the Muslims.

The Quran defines the ideal marriage as an institution in which two people share tranquility and compassion. They care for each other. They are each other's partner to share the difficulties and pleasures of this temporary world. But in fabricated Islam, marriage is an institution in which women are servants, even slaves of men. They must live their lives only to please and satisfy their husbands so that with their husband's approval, they can enter into Heaven! This perspective contradicts the Quran in which the genders are treated equally, and marriage is a harmonious institution of equals.

### *Female Genital Mutilation*

Female genital mutilation (FGM), sometimes called "female circumcision," is widespread in Muslim-majority countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia. It is estimated that the numbers of circumcised women range between 100 to 200 million women globally. The operation, performed between the ages of infancy and adolescence, involves cutting a portion of the female sexual organ, usually the clitoris, with instruments like knives or razors. The larger the excision, the greater the chances of harm to the women. However, even the smallest excision can cause infections, chronic pain, infertility, and even death. In addition to the physical damage, female circumcision also generates grievous psychological problems. The World Health Organization (WHO) and many other health organizations have issued strong statements warning that this operation is harmful to women's health.

It is widely believed that female genital mutilation is peculiar to Islam. Many people attack Islam through documentaries and social media for this supposedly "Islamic" practice. However, in Africa, the practice is not restricted to Muslim women; the practice has been, is being, inflicted on Christian girls

and girls of many other faiths as well. While 55% of Christian women in Niger have been circumcised, only 2% of Muslim women had undergone this surgery.<sup>144</sup> And the practice predates both Christianity and Islam; studies of mummies have shown that this practice existed in ancient Egypt. These facts accumulate to warn us against associating this practice with Islam alone. It derives not from the Quran but, rather, from the culture and traditions of these areas. And this vicious cultural practice has been incorporated into a wide variety of very different religions.

Since many people associate this vicious African cultural practice solely with Islam, and since it disproportionately harms Muslim women in our day, we will examine it from a Quranic perspective.

The foreign and harmful cultural practice of female genital mutilation found its way into some people's understanding and practice of "Islam" through, as we have come to expect, fabricated hadiths. For example, one hadith has the Prophet speaking to Umm Athiya, who performed female circumcision in Medina; after stating that FGM is allowed, the Prophet advises:

"Do not cut too deep, because not cutting too deep will provide more pleasure for both the woman and her husband."<sup>145</sup>

As a result, some schools of Islamic thought treat the practice as obligatory and others as highly recommended. Following in the pleasure-denying mode of this hadith, Abdulhalim Hamid (d:1905), in *A Woman's Duties to Her Spouse According to Islam*, claims that the circumcision of a woman is an embellishment because the operation increases the beauty of her face and tames her instincts.<sup>146</sup>

Female genital mutilation is a vicious and harmful cultural practice that predates Islam. This Quranically-foreign cultural practice was incorporated into Islam through fabricated hadiths. It has no place in Islam properly understood.

### *Menstruation*

Rayan Mubarak from Sudan gets sad when she remembers the first time she had her period. As a kid, she used to spend time in the mosque with her family. Her grandmother would go to the mosque frequently for prayers, and Rayan loved accompanying her. When she was 13, she had her first period. She felt awkward because her mother told her that she had grown up; she did not understand what that meant. She didn't feel all grown up. What was different from the day before, she could not figure out. The next day, she told her mother that she was going to the mosque with her grandmother as usual. But her mother told her that she was not allowed to enter the mosque or to hold the Quran until she was cleansed of her period. She remembers that moment very clearly, the sadness she had, the

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<sup>144</sup> Female Genital Mutilation, A Statistical Overview and Explorattion of the Dynamics od Change, [https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/UNICEF\\_FGM\\_report\\_July\\_2013\\_Hi\\_res.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/UNICEF_FGM_report_July_2013_Hi_res.pdf).

<sup>145</sup> Abu Dawood, "Edeb," 179. Abu Dawood himself, after having recounted this hadith adds that its credibility is dubious. Everybody, who has somehow shown interest in the history and method of hadiths, knows that in *Risale ila ehli Mekke fi vasfi Sunenih* that he wrote to present his *Sünen*, Abu Dawood stated that whenever he could not find a credible hadith on a certain subject, he used hadiths of dubious credibility.

<sup>146</sup> Abdülhalim Hamid, *İslam'da Kadının Eşine Karşı Vazifeleri*, p.12.

disappointment she lived. For the first time, she thought she was dirty. She could not understand why God made her dirty, why God created her deficient.

Many Muslim thinkers and traditions claim that Islam forbids menstruating women from going to mosques, fasting, performing ritual prayers, or touching the Quran. Such restrictions are not to be found in the Quran. The sole prohibition in the Quran concerning menstruation is a ban on sexual intercourse during menstruation (a prohibition for both women and men):

And they ask you about menstruation: say, "It is painful, so keep away from women during menstruation. And do not approach them until they are cleansed. When they are cleansed, approach them in the way God has directed you. "God loves the repentant, and he loves those who keep clean. (Quran 2:222)

If God had commanded menstruating women not to touch the Quran, go to mosques, pray or fast, he would have declared this clearly (as he did with intercourse). Since the Quran does not prohibit the prayers and fasts of menstruating women, a Muslim cannot claim that they are forbidden. And whatever is not forbidden is permitted. So menstruating women are permitted to pray, fast, attend mosques and touch the Quran.

Consider ritual prayer—in which Muslims stop whatever they are doing, bow down, and turn their faces to God. For the Muslims, such ritual contact with God is so important that they cannot stop praying even in war or when traveling under the threat of bandits (they are, however, allowed to shorten prayers until the danger passes). So we read:

But if you are in danger, pray walking or riding, and when you are again secure, bear God in mind - since it is he who taught you what you did not previously know. (Quran 2:239)

When you travel in the land, there is no blame on you for shortening the prayers, if you fear that the disbelievers may harm you. The disbelievers are your manifest enemies. (Quran 4:101)

If prayer is so important that it cannot be suspended in such dangerous situations, women should not be denied ritual access to God just because of their normal, monthly blood flow.

It should be noted that the Quran does permit sick people to postpone their fasting until they feel better (Quran 2:185). So women who suffer during menstruation thereby are permitted by the Quran to fast when they are feeling better. That, of course, is their free choice.

But the Quran rejects any wholesale, ban on menstruating women going to mosques, reading the Quran, fasting and praying. According to Süleyman Ateş, former Chief of Religious Affairs in Turkey:

"Nobody can ban anything that is not banned by the Quran. Claims contradicting the Quran cannot be accepted as hadiths. Traditions regarding women in menstruation have been presented as Islam in the form of hadiths. If these claims had had a credible basis, the Quran would most certainly have had a statement concerning the fact that menstruating women could not carry out these rituals.

On the other hand, the Quran states that Muslims should not have sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman; why then it does not say that about a menstruating woman's other religious

obligations like she cannot pray, fast during this time? Or is it that, according to God, sexual relations are more important than prayers, fasting, or reading the Quran? We should relinquish these kinds of views and practices contrary to the Quran and return to the Quran and practice what the Quran says.”<sup>147</sup>

Whatever is not forbidden is permitted. The Quran does not prohibit menstruating women from praying, fasting, or attending worship. So, according to Islam properly understood, menstruating women are permitted to pray, fast and attend worship—that is, Muslim women, like all believers, are enthusiastically granted shame-free access to God through prayers and fasting and worship.

### *Stoning Adulterers*

Adultery is forbidden for both man and woman. Stoning is the punishment, according to “Islamic” law. It is done by putting the adulterers in a hole in the ground and then throwing stones at their heads until they die. This is how Hassan Ali from Egypt describes how the punishment of stoning practiced. Sadly, this description is put into practice in Afghanistan. A 19 years-old woman, Rokshana, had been forced to marry against her will and fled with another man. The couple was caught two days later, and the Taliban leader of the village ordered that Rokshana be stoned to death for adultery. The sentence was executed by putting Rokshana in a hole into the ground, only her head poking above the surface. The men around her began to pick up rocks and hurl them at her from a close range. It was really unbearable to hear her cries in agony<sup>148</sup>. In July 2001, Maryam Ayoubi, aged 30, was reportedly stoned to death in Evin Prison in Tehran, Iran.<sup>149</sup>

The stoning to death of adulterers—men and women alike—is one of the most controversial issues concerning Islam. Although it is not a “woman only” issue, we have decided to include it in our book because it disproportionately affects women.

According to the claims of canonical jurisprudence texts, stoning should be carried out with stones the size of chickpeas (which means that the person will be killed slowly after much suffering); a guilty woman should be half-buried during the stoning, while a man should be standing.

But we are not here to praise hadiths or jurisprudence texts. We follow the Quran. So let’s immediately get to the point: the stoning to death of adulterers is not mentioned in the Quran; indeed, this practice contradicts the penalty described in the Quran for adulterers. So, while nothing more needs to be said to a Muslim, we will continue for a bit longer.

Like nearly every other religion, Islam forbids sexual relations between unmarried people. However, the penalty for adultery in the Quran is not stoning to death, but “a hundred lashes (*celde*)”:

The adulteress and the adulterer—whip each one of them a hundred lashes (*celdetin*), and let no pity towards them overcome you regarding God’s Law, if you believe in God and the Last Day. And let a group of believers witness their punishment. (Quran 24:2)

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<sup>147</sup> Süleyman Ateş, *Kur’an Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 8, p.17.

<sup>148</sup> Woman Stoned to Death in Afghanistan over Accusation of Adultery, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/04/asia/afghanistan-taliban-woman-stoning/index.html>.

<sup>149</sup> Iran and Executions by Stoning, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/56000/mde130012008en.pdf>.

“*Celde*” refers to lashes that only hurt the surface of the skin, not dig deeper, thus avoiding damage to internal organs (which is why “*celde*” is used instead of “*asa*” or “*minsee*,” which mean “stick” or “club”). And, since the verse requires a group of believers to witness the punishment, the aim of the punishment is not the infliction of bodily damage but rather to expose the shame of the sinner.

In the Quran, the punishment of adultery requires the testimony of four eyewitnesses (Quran 24:4). But securing four eyewitnesses to an adulterous act seems unlikely, especially when, according to the Quran, you cannot enter another person’s home without permission to enter (Quran 24:27-28). And adulterers do not typically permit visitors to enter their homes! So the Quran is saying that an act of adultery will be punished only when it is committed openly. On the very rare occasion when adultery is openly committed, the Quran requires an open punishment (with reeds, not stones).

Stoning to death was introduced into Islam through fabricated hadiths, notwithstanding a great deal of opposition. Consider just one fabricated hadith in which Aisha says:

“The verse of stoning was revealed, and it was written on a paper and kept under my bed. When the Messenger of God passed away, and we were preoccupied with his death, a goat entered and ate away the paper.”<sup>150</sup>

According to the hadith, a stoning verse had been revealed to the Prophet but had been eaten by a hungry goat, and so was lost (until she recalled it). Such a fanciful scenario flies in the face of the many faithful who had memorized the Quran before the Prophet’s death. Moreover, the goat story contradicts, for example, Quran 15:9, which promises that the Quran will be preserved. Finally, this fabrication asserts a commandment that contradicts commandments in the Quran. But the Quran will not be contradicted.

We conclude repeating our argument: the stoning to death of adulterers is not mentioned in the Quran; indeed, this practice contradicts the penalty described in the Quran for adulterers. Nothing more needs to be said to a Muslim.

### *Slavery and Sexuality*

When the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) ruled that the owners of women slaves can have sex with them, they backed this *fatwa* with alleged hadiths referred to the Prophet Muhammed. So, Ashwaq Haji Hamid, a Yazidi girl, became a sex slave when she was only 14.<sup>151</sup> Nadia Murad, the 2018 Nobel peace prize winner was kidnapped by ISIS and sold in a sex-slave market.<sup>152</sup> Another Yazidi girl became pregnant after being raped as a sex-slave; when she attempted to escape, she was captured and raped again by six men. After that, she was repeatedly sold and raped by groups of ISIS fighters. The more time she was

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<sup>150</sup>Ahmed b. Hanbel, *al-Musnad*, XLIII, 342; Ibn Majah, “Nikah,” 36.

<sup>151</sup> Former Yazidi Sex Slave Faints While Confronting Her ISIS Rapist on Iraqi TV, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/former-yazidi-sex-slave-faints-while-confronting-her-is-rapist-on-iraqi-tv/>.

<sup>152</sup> I was an ISIS Sex Slave, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/06/nadia-murad-isis-sex-slave-nobel-peace-prize>.

sold, the more her monetary value declined. She was told over and over again that ISIS fighters were simply implementing the Prophet Muhammed's *sunnah* (law).<sup>153</sup>

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when the Quran was being revealed, slavery was common in Mecca, Medina, and in many parts of the world. People were enslaved for many reasons, such as not being able to pay their debts or as a result of wars. But while slavery was common, enslaving free people was not permitted by the Quran, no matter what the reason was. And for those who were already enslaved, the Quran aimed to free them gradually. For example, the Quran prescribes atonements for many mistakes; one of the main ways to atone for a sin is to free a slave:

Never should a believer kill another believer, unless by accident. Anyone who kills a believer by accident must set free a believing slave, and pay compensation to the victim's family unless they remit it. If the victim belonged to a people who are hostile to you, but is a believer, then the compensation is to free a believing slave. If he belonged to a people with whom you have a treaty, then compensation should be handed over to his family, and a believing slave set free. Anyone who lacks the means must fast for two consecutive months, by way of repentance to God. God is All-Knowing, Most Wise. (Quran 4:92)

The Quran advises freeing slaves as atonement for accidental killings (4:92), estranging one's wife (58:3-4), and for not keeping an oath (5:89). If any new slaves were not taken (as ordered by the Quran), these atonement practices alone might have eliminated slavery completely.

But the Quran has additional commandments for freeing slaves in the Quran (9:60; 2:177 and 90:12-16). By offering to "free a slave" as an atonement for many wrong behaviors, by demanding the freeing of slaves under other conditions, and by not permitting taking new slaves by stating that Muslims should free the prisoners of war at the end of the war with or without a ransom, the Quran draws a road map for the Muslims to abolish slavery.

When you encounter those, who disbelieve, strike at their necks. Then, when you have routed them, bind the captives securely. Then either release them by grace, or by ransom when the war ends. Had God willed, He could have defeated them Himself, but He thus tests you by one another. As for those who are killed in the way of God, He will not let their deeds go to waste. (Quran 47:4)

If the Quran's commandments and recommendations of freeing the slaves after the battles and as acts of charity and atonement had been followed, slavery as an institution would have been banished from Islamic societies no later than the first centuries of Islam. Sadly and in violation of the Quran, they did not. Since some Muslims considered slavery legitimate, it persisted in the Islamic world.

Female slaves turned into concubines, became sex-slaves under so-called "Islamic Law." Yet the Quran forbids sexual intercourse outside of marriage (and offers no alternative "sexual intercourse without marriage"). In cases where men cannot marry free women due to a lack of funds, the Quran advises them to *marry* believing slaves.

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<sup>153</sup> The Sex Slave Trade of the Yazidi Women by ISIS, <https://www.insideover.com/women/the-sex-slave-trade-of-the-yazidi-women-by-isis.html>.

Whoever of you cannot afford to marry free believing women; he may marry one of the believing maids whom you rightfully possess. God is well aware of your faith. You are from one another. Marry them, then, with their guardian's leave, and give them their bridal gift (*mahr*) properly- they being virtuous women who are not in fornication, and secret love affairs. And when they are married, and later become guilty of immoral conduct, they shall be liable to half the penalty to which free married women are liable... (Quran 4:25)

So while they may marry believing slaves, they are not permitted to have intercourse with them without marrying them.

And marry the singles among you and those among your servants and maids. If they are poor, God will enrich them from His bounty. God is All-Encompassing, All-Knowing. (Quran 24:32)

And also, we read from the above verse that for those who are not free, be they slaves or prisoners of war, marriage is required for sexual intercourse.

Though the Quran forbids it, 4:3 of the Quran has been distorted to justify intercourse with unmarried concubines:

And if you have reason to fear that you might not act equitably towards orphans, then marry from among women such as are lawful to you - two, or three, or four: but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then marry one - or those whom you rightfully possess. This will make it more likely that you will not deviate from the right course. (Quran 4:3)

Our reading, based on the Arabic and the rest of the Quran, holds that those who cannot be equally fair towards all his wives should marry one or marry one of the women "they rightfully possess," that is, a female slave. In many translations, we read that such a man should "...marry one or be content with those you rightfully possess." Yet "be content with" is not in the original Arabic, and such translations ignore the unmentioned verb, "to marry." Canonical jurisprudence professor Dr. Abdülaziz Bayındır explains as follows:

According to Arabic grammar rules, the hidden verb of the sentence is "to get married," which is in the first sentence of the verse. Two words attached with the conjunction "or" cannot have two separate verbs. But some scholars have added the verb "to be content" to the second word and distorted the structure of the sentence. This is nothing but distorting the meaning of the verse. It is impossible to attribute this meaning to this verse because the expression "*ma meleket eymanukum*" (whom you rightfully possess) follows the verb "*wahideten*" (marry), thus requiring marriage with the enslaved women also."<sup>154</sup>

The text in Arabic, is clear: those who cannot care for more than one wife are permitted to marry either a woman or one of their believing slaves. This text does not permit men to have sex outside of the sanctified context of marriage, even with a slave or concubine.

By encouraging the freeing of slaves as atonement for various sins and forbidding the collection of new slaves, the Quran clearly aims at freeing all non-free people. The Quran rejects the enslavement of

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<sup>154</sup>Abdulaziz Bayındır, "Savaş Esirleri ve Cariyelik," *Kitap ve Hikmet*, Number: 11, 1-11.

people—at the end of a war, prisoners should be freed either in exchange for ransom or no ransom whatsoever. And again, according to the Quran, one can have sexual intercourse with women slaves or prisoners only by marrying them, and one must not have sexual intercourse with them without their consent; female war prisoners cannot be turned into concubines and sexual slaves.

### *Virgins in Paradise*

It is believed that in the afterlife, if a Muslim man goes to heaven, he will be rewarded with beautiful virgins, *houries*, as sexual partners. *Houries* are one of the main objectives for Muslim men to strive for paradise; to have 72 beautiful women who are virgins and stay virgins all the time. This belief is so strong that even some male suicide bombers who hope to go to heaven (because they are martyrs) blow themselves up with a dream of having sexual intercourse with 72 virgins waiting for them in the gardens of Paradise. In an Al Qaeda manual found in Mohammad Atta's suitcase, who is one of the *jihadists* who blew up the World Trade Center in 9/11, it was written that his heavenly brides (*houries*) were waiting for him in Paradise.<sup>155</sup>

Does the Quran state anything about "*houris*" being a sexual reward for men? The clear answer is "No." The Quran speaks neither of sex nor virgins (*houris*) awaiting men in the afterlife.

It is possible that we will have sexuality in paradise since verses in the Quran state that all desires will be satisfied once we are there (41: 31 and 43:71). However, given that people will be recreated in the afterlife (46:61), it is also possible that we will no longer have sexual desires. We only know this: in the afterlife, all of our desires will be met.

The Quran also says that in the afterlife, there will be more blessings than in this world (76:20) but that no one can know the exact nature of those blessings. So those blessings must be narrated by "comparisons" (*teşbih*) (3:7), indirect hints of what the afterlife might be like in terms that finite humans can understand. But we should not take those comparisons literally.

As for the "*houris*," they are believed to be rewards, sexual partners for men in Paradise. Yet the word "*houris*" is neither feminine nor masculine; it is gender-free. According to the Quran, *houris* will be coupled (*zevvecnahum*) with people in Paradise (44:54, 52:20). But there is no reference to sexual coupling. Indeed, the same word (*zevc*) is also used for the coupling of souls (81:7) and for gathering people in groups in the afterlife (56:7); "*zevc*" in those verses is not associated with sex. Why insist then that the "*houris*" mentioned in the Quran are "sexual partners" for men while they could also very well be the friends, servants, or guides of all the people in Paradise since the word is neither a feminine word nor bears any sexuality?

If God had wanted, he could have used words like "*lamese*" which has sexual meaning to describe the relations with "*houris*." Considering that there is no such clear statement, we should reject the belief that Paradise is a sexual haven for men which is in total contradiction with the spirit of the verses of the

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<sup>155</sup> Kanan Makiya, Hassan Mneimneh, Manual for Raid, New York Review of Books, January 17, 2002, p.1-13.

Quran stating that in the afterlife everybody in Paradise (not just women or just men) will be compensated for their acts.

The best stand in terms of the word “*houris*” would be to say that their functions have not been described in detail in the Quran and answer the question “what is their function” with “we do not know.”<sup>156</sup>

In summary, not only does the Quran not provide any explicit statement on whether or not there is sexual life in the afterlife, there also is no clear statement on whether or not “*houris*” are the sexual partners of men. Words like “*houris*, *kevaib*, *etrab*,” which are mentioned in the relevant verses and which are generally interpreted with sexual references, are used for both feminine and masculine forms; thus, there is no reason to perceive them as prizes reserved for men only. Fabricated hadiths have played a great role in the shaping of the “*houris*” perception, which has no basis in the Quran, together with the male-centered interpretations. It is clear that when those wishing to provide an androcentric structure for both this world and the Hereafter could not find what they were looking for in the Quran tried to shape this perception using fabricated hadiths and misinterpretations of the verses.

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<sup>156</sup> It is believed that in the Quran, there is a reference to “virginity” and thus to sexuality in Paradise. Three verses have been quoted to confirm this: 55:56, 74, and 56: 36. In the 56<sup>th</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> verses, it is said that in the gardens of Paradise, there are mates to whom neither a man nor an invisible being has ever touched. However, nowhere else in the Quran has the expression “*yatmishunne*” in the verse, which means “contact, touching,” been used for sexual intercourse. To express sexual intercourse, words like “*lamese*” (5:6), “*eta*” (2: 222), “*messe*” (2:236, 237), “*başera*” (2:187) are used in the Quran. This being the case, would not it be better to interpret the 56<sup>th</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> verses as “not owned by anyone else or untouched” with no reference to sexuality since there is nothing openly expressing “virginity”?

And for 56:36, although it has been translated as “...having resurrected them (*houris*) as virgins”, “*houris*” is not in the original Arabic. 56:34 talks about “high raised couches” in Paradise, and 35 tells that “We have created them a new creation.” We differ in the interpretation of the 36th verse with most of the interpreters. According to Arabic, as in English, some nouns are referred to as “she.” Thus, we believe that the word “*ekbar*” in verse 36 refers to the “couches” in verse 34 rather than “*houris*,” which, again, is not in the Arabic text. So instead of concluding that “*houris* have been resurrected as virgins” in Heaven, we believe that translating the 36<sup>th</sup> verse as “they (couches) have not been used before” is a more reasonable translation.

The Quran’s comparison of the “*houris*” to “pearls” in 56:23 has been interpreted with sexual connotation as well. But in the Quran, children in the afterlife (*vildan*) have also been compared to pearls (76:19). Presumably, there is no-one who would interpret child-pearl comparison with sexuality. Similarly, the word “*gilman*” in 52:24, which is used for “youngsters,” has been compared to “pearls,” but this also has not been interpreted with sexuality. This being the situation, how can we state that the word “*houris*” implies sexuality? (The “ruby” and “coral” comparisons in 55:58 should also be evaluated within this framework.)

The word “*kevaibe etraben*” in 78:33 is another term that has been misinterpreted with a sexual connotation. That verse is usually translated as “And full-breasted (*kevaibe*) maidens of equal age (*etraben*).” First, let us state that the usage of the words “*kevaibe*” and “*etrab*” are the same for both masculine and feminine forms; in other words, these words cannot express femininity. The word “*etraben*” means “well-matched, suitable, of the same age.” On the other hand, one of the meanings of the word “*kevaibe*” is “roundish.” These two words have been translated mostly as “full-breasted” with additions to the verse words like “maidens” and “breasts.” But without those additions, it would be more appropriate; to interpret the 33<sup>rd</sup> verse with reference to the grapes in the previous verse (32<sup>nd</sup> verse) rather than to maidens, which are not even mentioned in the verse. So the right interpretation would be it is “the grapes that are round (*kevaib*) and well-matched (*etraben*)” Unpublished Quran exegesis notes of Prof. Mehmet Okuyan.

## Chapter 6

### Socio-Economic Issues

In 632, the revelation of the Quran ended with the death of the Prophet. The socio-economic reforms the Quran introduced were revolutionary, especially for women who, until that date, were typically believed to hold a status lower than men. Women were considered equal to men, could own property, could marry and divorce, and could work where they pleased (alongside men). Sadly, after the death of the Prophet, the rights and freedoms given to women began to deteriorate, and women ended up in a worse situation than before because of the revival of the old traditions and newly introduced misogynistic practices. Muslim women were again forced to live invisible lives within their homes, with no right to property, education, inheritance, etc. But to see what Islam promises for women, the Quran must be read carefully.

#### *Isolation*

In Quran 3:195, God commends both males and females who migrated to Medina and were persecuted for their religious beliefs. Muslim women, who endured the same hardships as men, were not required to seek permission from their husbands before fighting for God. All believers—men and women alike—were praised for their courageous behaviors:

And so their Lord answered them: "I will not waste the work of any worker among you, whether male or female. You are one of another. For those who migrated, and were expelled from their homes, were persecuted because of Me, and fought and were killed- I will remit for them their sins and will admit them into gardens beneath which rivers flow- a reward from God. With God is the ultimate reward."

God Himself commends the labors "of any worker among you, whether male or female." God likewise rewards anyone, male or female, who courageously fought and died on the side of God. There is no mention of anyone—male or female—first securing permission from their spouse to fight and die for God's sake.

Yet, Islamic tradition would come to deny a woman the freedom even to visit her sick father or attend his funeral, without her husbands' permission:

"A man told his wife not to go downstairs to the premises where her father lived. When her father fell ill, the woman wished to go down to take care of her father and then sent a message to the Messenger of God explaining the situation. The Messenger of God ordered: "Obey your husband." And the father died. Then the woman asked the Messenger of God's permission to attend her father's funeral. The Messenger of God once more ordered, "Obey your husband." Later, he let the woman know: "As a prize for your obedience to your lord (husband) God has forgiven your father."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Imam Ghazali, *Ihya'e Ulum-ed'Deen*, Vol. 2, p.147-148.

According to this hadith, the woman is not even allowed to walk down a flight of stairs to care for her dying father (unless she first secures the permission of her husband)!

As noted, God condemns the fabrication of obligations that contravene the Quran. And the Quran repeatedly states that Muslims should care for their parents (none conditioned on securing her husband's permission). Such a fabricated requirement stands condemned. Indeed, God Himself, to whom obeisance is solely due, rigidly requires all believers without condition to care for their parents:

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be good to your parents. If either of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect, nor scold them, but say them kind words. (Quran 17:23)

Say, "Come, let me tell you what your Lord has ordered: that you associate nothing with Him; that you honor your parents; that you do not kill your children because of poverty. We provide for you and them. And do not approach immoralities, what is apparent of them, and what is concealed. Do not kill the soul which God has sanctified- except in the course of justice. All this he has enjoined upon you so that you may understand." (Quran 6:151)

According to the Quran, even the Prophet does not know who is going to end up in Paradise or Hell. So how can a hadith claim that the father was forgiven due to his daughter's obedience to her husband? This is a final reason to reject this hadith.

Say, "I have no control over any benefit or harm to myself, except what God wills. Had I known the future, I would have increased the good, and no harm would have touched me. I am only a warner, and a herald of good news to people who believe." (Quran 7:188)

### *Testimony*

Under the *Hudood* laws of Pakistan, proof of rape requires the testimony of four male witnesses and testimony of women does not carry any legal weight according to the *Sharia* law in the country, which says that two women's testimony is equal to that of one man's. This means that women, even if a victim of a rape, cannot testify on her behalf, and unless she can find four male witnesses, the rapist goes free. She cannot prove she was raped no matter what. Moreover, many women who are unable to prove they are raped have themselves been charged with adultery. Majeeda Mujis, an 18-year-old girl, was abducted by men, and repeatedly raped by her abductors over a month's period and was finally turned down to police. Although she filed a complaint against her abductors, police charged her with illicit sex, imprisoned her, and men went free because she did not have four male witnesses to testify for her.<sup>158</sup>

Traditional Islamic culture includes provisions concerning women's testimony that are not revealed in the Quran. It holds that, in family matters like divorce and marriage, the testimony of two women is equal to that of a man; women are not allowed to testify at all in criminal cases like theft and murder; some sects claim that women cannot testify in cases of adultery. But the Quran neither states nor implies

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<sup>158</sup> Double Jeopardy, Police Abuse of Women in Pakistan, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1992/pakistan/>.

that a woman's testimony is either deficient or unacceptable. Consider a case in which a man claims that his wife has committed adultery:

And as for those who accuse their own wives but have no witness except themselves, let each of these (accusers) call God four times to witness that he is indeed telling the truth, and the fifth time, that God's curse be upon him if he is lying. But all punishment shall be averted from her by her calling four times to witness that he is lying, and the fifth time, that God's curse be upon her if he is telling the truth. (Quran 24:6-9)

The husband, we read, testifies four times that he is telling the truth, and then asked to call God's curse upon himself if he is lying. If the wife does the same—swearing four times that she is telling the truth and then calling God's curse upon herself if she is lying—her testimony overrules her husband's. Worth noting: the woman's testimony concerning adultery is permitted, and her testimony is superior to that of her husband.

In cases of adultery, the Quran requires four witnesses, but none of a particular gender (Quran 24:4). In divorce cases, two witnesses—regardless of gender—are required to prove that the divorced woman is not with a child (Quran 65:2). Since the Quran makes no gender distinctions in these matters, women's testimony is equivalent to that of men.

Misconceptions about the value of women's testimony derive from 2:282 from the Quran, which actually concerns long-term financial debts:

O you who believe! When you borrow debt among yourselves for a certain period, write it down. And have a scribe write in your presence, in all fairness. And let no scribe refuse to write, as God has taught him. So let him write, and let the debtor dictate. And let him fear God, his Lord, and diminish nothing from it. But if the debtor is mentally deficient, or weak, or unable to dictate, then let his guardian dictate with honesty. And call to witness two men from among you. If two men are not available, then one man and two women whose testimony is acceptable to all—if one of them deviates (*tedille*), the other will remind her the truth. Witnesses must not refuse when called upon. And do not think it too trivial to write down, whether small or large, including the time of payment. That is more equitable with God and stronger as evidence, and more likely to prevent doubt—except in the case of a spot transaction between you—then there is no blame on you if you do not write down. Have witnesses if you trade also, and let no harm be done to either scribe or witness. If you do that, it is vileness on your part. And fear God. God teaches you. God is aware of everything. (Quran 2:282)

Testifying for crimes like theft or murder are generally based on eye-witness accounts. The witnesses are not there voluntarily. Those committing these crimes will mostly try to deny their actions. That is why eye-witness testimony is precious. Disallowing female eye-witnesses, who make up half of the population, would create serious problems in convicting the guilty. Rejecting the testimony of one or more women who have witnessed, say, a theft or a murder, when there are no male witnesses, is contrary to reason and the Quran. Moreover, the Quran says Muslims—men and women alike—should “not lie and should be honest when testifying” (Quran 25:72; 75:33).<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> We have noticed how those not willing to accept the testimony of women in certain areas, are willing to accept the testimony of female hadith narrators, without distinguishing between genders.

But witnessing long-term financial debts is done by invitation, and it is voluntary. We understand from the verse that in cases on loan transactions, witnesses could be endangered and even harmed. And if witnesses fear for their lives, they may refuse to testify since it is a voluntary testimony. That is why the verse commands the scribe and the witnesses not to refuse their duties and then prohibits “harming either the scribe or the witnesses.” Because of the chance of harm, physically stronger men rather than women are preferred. In situations where a witness could be harmed, the responsibility to testify is reserved for men.

The verse continues: “...If two men are not available, then one man and two women whose testimony is acceptable to all-if one of them deviates, the other will correct her...” Two women who stand together can resist possible threats. Including this additional threat: a woman who contradicts a lying man may be subject to stress and pressure from the testifier. On the other hand, if there are one male and two women witnesses, the three witnesses can share responsibility. Moreover, when one man and one woman testify in the same way, and there is no dispute, there is no need for the other woman to testify. The second woman’s testimony is needed only when there is a disagreement between the male and female witnesses.

Some have translated “if one of the women *deviates* the other will correct her” sentence in the verse as “if one of the women *forgets* the other will remind her.” We prefer “deviates” because, throughout the Quran, the word *dalle* means “deviating,” not forgetting. And since pressure on witnesses is mentioned various times, it ascribes a mistake in the first woman’s testimony to pressure.

Stating that the testimony of one man is equal to that of two women or that in some cases, women cannot testify at all, is contrary to the Quran. Only in cases of long-term loans, where harm to witnesses seems likely, is more responsibility granted to men.

### *Property*

Women throughout history, on the other hand, have been prevented from owning property and, even worse, treated as the property of either their fathers or their husbands. But the Quran has granted women the right to own and manage property. Indeed, the Quran granted women the right to property in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, an astounding twelve centuries before the US and Great Britain did.

The Quran’s permission for women to own and manage property is assumed in its requirement of all Muslims to donate some of their property to the needy. Charity is not a male-specific obligation (neither are ritual prayers nor fasting); all believers are required to share with the poor. This act of piety is possible only if a woman owns property and can dispose of it as she chooses. Receiving a bridal gift (*mahr*) before marriage and shares in inheritance shows that women can own and manage their own properties freely.

According to Islam, women can work, earn money, acquire property, and manage their property freely. Historical sources from the first days of Islam report that many women were engaged in commercial transactions independently of their husbands.

### *Inheritance*

Women in pre-Islamic Arab traditions seldom had the right to an inheritance; it was typically apportioned among the male survivors since the inheritance laws financially dispossessed women. For example, a new widow was considered part of the estate, just another object to be claimed by the male heirs.<sup>160</sup> An inheriting male from her husband's side who was first to cover her with his cloak arrogated the executive right to marry her together with her share in the inheritance. This could even be her stepson. But if she managed to escape to her tribe before the arrival of the inheritor, then both the woman and her property would revert to her tribe.<sup>161</sup> Even worse, the woman lacked the social power to object to such an arrangement.

Daughters of the deceased often found themselves in such dire situations also. They could both be prevented from receiving a share of the inheritance *and* be sexually exploited and mistreated. The guardian could force the prettiest one to marry him, thus controlling her share of the inheritance and, at the same time, avoiding the payment of bridal gift (*mahr*). But if the girl was not pretty enough, the inheritor could prevent her from getting married and take her property.<sup>162</sup>

But the Quran commands the safeguarding of the rights of orphaned girls and guarantees a women's share in the inheritance.

The right to inherit and control property as they see fit protects women from financial impoverishment and social devastation. Just inheritance laws, then, can prevent financial impoverishment and social devastation. The Quran steps in at this point. By granting women the right to receive an inheritance, it seeks to prevent the expropriation of their property. By granting women the right to manage their own property, the Quran seeks to ensure financial stability if they should divorce. Finally, by banning the exploitation of orphans, the Quran introduces major improvements in the statuses and living conditions of women. In every case, the Quran seeks to disable the cultural conditions and practices that undermined the financial well-being of females.

How could one then, all this notwithstanding, claim that the Quran has not granted enough rights to women by a reference to 4.11 of the Quran?

God decrees a will for the benefit of your children; the male gets twice the share of the female..."  
(Quran 4:11)

While, *prima facie*, this verse seems to value women at 50% of men, it must be read within the social context of the Quran as well as within Quranic bridal gift (*mahr*) practices. First of all, the Quran is not gender-biased in distributing inheritance. For example, if both parents of the deceased are alive, both parties receive the same amount. In addition, at the time of the Quran, and in most societies today, men

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<sup>160</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.121.

<sup>161</sup> Al-Tabari, *Tefsiru't-Tabari*, VI, 524-526.

<sup>162</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 124.

carry the burden of supporting their families; the father is legally bound to meet the expenses of the children. According to the Quran, if a couple divorces, the man is obliged to pay for the expenses of the children and the mother as long as lactation continues.

Divorced mothers shall nurse their infants two full years if they so wish. The father shall provide the mother's food and clothing equitably... (Quran 2:233)

Finally, sons have the additional expense of paying a bridal gift (*mahr*) upon marriage, which is an extra financial burden compared to daughters who are the receiving side (if married).

Despite all these, the Quran provides great flexibility as far as different situations and conditions are concerned. Thus, it is always possible for someone to will an equal inheritance to his/her sons and daughters.<sup>163</sup>

O you who believe, witnessing a will when one of you is dying shall be done by two equitable people among you... (Quran 5:106)

It is decreed that when death approaches, you shall write a will for the benefit of the parents and relatives, equitably. This is a duty upon the righteous. (Quran 2:180)

In making a will, then the righteous parent, sensitive to circumstance and personality, will be guided by equity and wisdom.

## CONCLUSION

In almost every period of history, women have been disadvantaged. They were subjected to the orders of their fathers until they got married, husbands after getting married, and sons or other male guardians during their widowhood. Even today, women around the world are deprived of the same opportunities enjoyed by men; for example, even though women do a great part of production in the world, they continue to accrue fewer assets than men. Conditions of women in the world are unfavorable independently of Islam.

On the other hand, women in Muslim societies enjoy no better and often worse conditions than their counterparts in the rest of the world. Indeed, Muslim-majority countries are noteworthy for the fact that women have many fewer rights than men.

We have systematically rejected such misogynistic intrusions into Islam through our fidelity to the Quran and its remarkable vision of equality, mercy, and tranquility. We also have tried to show how misinterpreted Quranic verses and fabricated hadiths have enabled the disenfranchisement of women.

While the Quran is Divine, its interpretations are not; they are man-made (which contributes to the

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<sup>163</sup> We should underline an important difference between the revealed Islam and the fabricated Islam. Even though the verses of the Quran offer recommendations for the distribution of an inheritance, precedence has been given to the will. Traditionalists have tried to annul the right to make a will mentioned in four verses of the Quran through attributing a fabricated hadith to the Prophet as if he had said: "There is no need to a will." In this case, not only a fabricated provision is added to Islam through hadiths, but the verses of the Quran have been nullified by them. Understanding the precedence of the will is of fundamental importance for the understanding of this frequently debated topic.

problem). Male interpreters who are tainted by their prejudices and desires, by the values of the societies they live in, by their positions within existing political structures, by attitudes towards social demands and expectations, and by their private and often selfish interests and beliefs, created a misogynistic system that enjoys a great authority in Muslim societies.

In addition to misogynistic interpretations, the writers of the most famous hadith books, the founders of the canonical jurisprudence schools, have all been men. These men unmistakably favored their own gender by hadiths and misinterpretations, presenting women's obedience to men as one of the main obligations of religion. As a result, they turned women into de facto slaves of men.

We unmasked a series of highly influential but no-less fabricated hadiths that denigrate women and construct a misogynistic narrative. For example, hadiths that state that a woman cannot visit her sick parents without her husband's permission violate the Quran's compassionate command to care for our parents. Hadiths that state that the Prophet claimed that most people in Hell will be women violate the Quran, which tells that even the Prophet does not know who will be in Paradise. Hadiths that prevent a woman from entering places where men work or forbid women from receiving an education, oppose the Quran's descriptions of women participating and learning alongside men. And hadiths that claim women are deficient in mind and religion oppose the Quran's consistent claim that men and women are equally endowed by God to use their minds to achieve their own destinies. The Prophet cannot have said anything contradicting the Quran.

Our overriding principle has been to ground ourselves on the Quran. A clear understanding of the Quran reveals, we have argued, the kind of flexibility and openness that exists in the Quran. On matters on which the Quran keeps silent, individuals are granted, by God, the freedom to fill those blanks. While this interpretive freedom has made it possible for the Quran to adapt over a long range of time to very different cultures, some scholars resist: they seek to fill up those "conscious silences" of the Quran in ways that satisfy their own desires or increase their own power and position, thus cluttering Islam with many superstitions.

Please note: we are not asking Muslims to submit to "Western, liberal, Enlightenment" values and arguments. Any addition to Islam in the name of either tradition or modernity is unacceptable. The Quran alone is our authority, one that surpasses tradition and Modernity. As such, we affirm that God's authority is superior to the authority of any human-made tradition.

We simply call our Muslim brothers and sisters to the Quran and to accept it with absolute confidence in all matters about Islam. And then seek to understand the Quran's remarkably merciful and liberating teachings on women, teachings that our tradition have sadly departed from.

We would be very happy if the contents of this book were to contribute to the correction of misconceptions and harms in the name of Islam related to women. Throughout the book, we have tried to show that the Quran sends its message of compassion and justice and equality to the women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century just as it did the women of the 7<sup>th</sup>. But to understand this, we must also understand the misogynistic accretions in the name of Islam, which have nothing to do with the Quran. We have aimed

at the truth, as presented in the Quran. If any of the ideas or arguments we have presented do not accord with God's words as found in the Quran, please reject them. Only God knows the truth about all things.

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