



Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW)  
Le Conseil canadien des femmes musulmanes (CCFM)

#MUSLIMMENSAYNO2VAW

# ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON

Engaging Men & Boys to  
End Violence in  
the Family

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## ABOUT CCMW

**T**he Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) is a national non-profit organization whose overarching mission is to ensure the equality, equity and empowerment of Muslim women. Founded in 1982, the organization has drawn upon faith and social justice for the betterment of Canadian society. For over 30 years CCMW has proudly advocated on behalf of Muslim women and their families and developed projects that enrich

the identity of Canadian-Muslims, encourage civic engagement, empower communities and lastly promote inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding. CCMW is composed of a National board that works to further CCMW's objectives at a national level, and its 12 local chapters and members, whose passion and hard work advances the vision of CCMW within local communities.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- We are guided by the Quranic message of God's mercy and justice, and of the equality of all persons, and that each person is directly answerable to God.
- We value a pluralistic society, and foster for the goals of strength and diversity within a unifying vision and the values of Canada. Our identity of being Muslim women and of diverse ethnicity and race is integral to being Canada.
- As Canadians, we abide by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the law of Canada.
- We believe in the universality of human rights, which means equality and social justice, with no restriction or discrimination based on gender race.
- We are vigilant in safeguarding and enhancing our identity and our rights to make informed choices amongst a variety of options.
- We acknowledge that CCMW is one voice amongst many who speak on behalf of Muslim women, and that there are others who may represent differing perspectives.
- We aim to be actively inclusive and accepting of diversity among ourselves, as Muslim women.

# OVERVIEW

Muslims are proud of the gender-egalitarianism found in the earliest sources of Islam. The Muslim scripture, the Qur'an, is a beacon of justice for Muslims who believe that it enshrines equality between the genders. The example of the Prophet Muhammad is similarly a source of pride, as he is seen as embodying the egalitarian principles of the Qur'an. The Prophet regularly stressed the importance of gender justice, insisted that women be treated with dignity and respect, and indeed sparked a revolution that placed women and men on equal footing. Muslims will tell you that, long before the rest of the world, Islam gave women basic rights like property-ownership, inheritance, family planning, consent in marriage, and child custody to name a few. Included in these rights were physical and psychological safety, and an unequivocal ban on domestic violence.

As we will see below, the Qur'an and sayings of Muhammad are replete with dictates that safeguard women and forbid domestic violence. There is no shortage of Qur'anic verses and prophetic reports that denounce any kind of physical or psychological violence against women. However, these foundational sources have gone through centuries of re-interpretation by a cadre of men who did not wish to see gender-egalitarianism as an Islamic value. These individuals selectively chose from scriptural sources, often reading against their plain-sense meanings, to propagate a vision of Islam in

which men are dominant over women, and in which domestic violence is condoned.

In the modern day, Muslims are beginning to recover their ancient heritage, and are resurrecting the original message of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. They convincingly argue that Islam is a thoroughly egalitarian religion, that women and men have equal dignity, and that domestic violence is categorically forbidden in Islam. The evidence is overwhelmingly on their side, but they have to contend with centuries of interpretations of Islam that privileged men over women, and with institutions that have been built to give power to men, and to take it away from women.

In this paper, we will examine the textual sources that form the foundation of Islam's egalitarian spirit, consider the challenges posed by historical interpretations of these sources, and think about ways to move forward in promoting gender equity, especially with respect to condemning domestic violence in all its forms. We will see that the main task ahead, beyond restoring the rights and protections originally given to women by Islam's foundational sources, will be for men and boys to take a leading role in making the gender-equal message of Islam a reality.

**T**he Qur'an regularly and unambiguously promotes gender equality. The Qur'an points out that men and women were created from a single soul, and are thus equal creations (Q. 4:1 and 7:189). The Qur'an clarifies that women and men have independent relationships to God, and that God does not differentiate based on gender. These sentiments are captured in statements like, "Whoever works righteousness, whether male or female, will enter Paradise, and will not be wronged in the least" (Q. 4:124; see also 3:195, 16:97, and 57:12). The Qur'an contains numerous statements attesting to the spiritual equality of women and men (Q. 33:35, 40:40, and 49:13 among others), and the Qur'an also clarifies that not only are men and women spiritually equal, but that they have similar rights in this world. Women and men are described as "protectors, one of another" (Q. 9:71) in that they work together to do good and avoid evil. Ideally, men and women work together in tandem, and one does not have power over the other.

The Qur'an recognizes that men have a history of taking advantage of women, and that men regularly accord women lesser rights and opportunities. The Qur'an laments this fact, and says that it should not be so, "Women have rights similar to those [of men] in all that is good, though men assume a position [of power] over [women]. God is Mighty and Wise." (Q. 2:228)

To counter this historical trend, the Qur'an stipulates a series of laws that protect and empower women, including those that give them rights to testify in court, receive inheritance, own property, and share custody of children. The Qur'an also gives women rights to marry whom they please, and encourages men and women to have marriages that are reciprocal (Q. 2:187) and loving (Q. 30:21). Whenever there is a dispute in the marriage, the Qur'an takes care to protect the rights of women. Whenever one spouse is in conflict with the other, for example, the Qur'an prescribes engaging in a three-part method for resolution: "Engage in mutual consultation, separate from the marital bed, and (finally) walk away from them." (Q. 4:34)

In this verse, the Qur'an instructs couples to first engage in consultation, then, if that does not resolve the issue, separate beds, and then, if that still does not resolve the issue, physically remove themselves from the others' presence. If none of these measures work, the next verse (Q. 4:35) prescribes peer counseling for the couple in the hopes that they can find a mutual solution, and then, if they still cannot reconcile, the Qur'an prescribes divorce. In case of divorce, the Qur'an institutes legal protections that ensure women's financial and psychological security (Q. 2:224, 2:241, and 65:6).

This method of conflict resolution models respectful behavior by deescalating tension and minimizing animosity. It is part of the larger Qur'anic ethos that promotes equal rights for women, encourages societies to move toward gender-egalitarianism, and commands that humans treat one another with love and respect, especially within the family. There is no room for domestic violence in this system, nor would it make any sense. Within the Qur'an's conflict-resolution model, which is centered on reconciliation, violence has no place. Besides, any form of domestic violence would violate the many dictates in the Qur'an that champion loving behavior and women's rights, as well as those that forbid Muslims to hurt, harm, or even make fun of one another (Q. 49:10-11).

The early Islamic community, led by the Prophet Muhammad, embodied these Qur'anic ideals, and modeled equality between women and men. As time passed and the Muslim community grew, however, the Qur'an was subject to re-interpretation by men who had no interest in women's rights. These men found a way to read violence into the text, and to use the Qur'an against its own spirit to disempower women. They justified their readings through highly selective and de-contextualized sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. As we will see, however, the Prophet Muhammad was a staunch advocate for women, and abhorred any kind of violence, let alone domestic violence.



We know of the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings through various reports, known as *ḥadīth*. The *ḥadīth* were passed down orally from generation to generation, until they were written down and compiled over 100 years after the Prophet’s death. At that time, there were hundreds of thousands of *ḥadīth* in circulation, and the vast majority of them were likely either inaccurate or outright forgeries. So, a handful of Muslim scholars set about sifting through the *ḥadīth* to find out which were most likely to be authentic. These scholars settled on a few thousand *ḥadīth* that were likely to be authentic, and collected them in books are known as ‘reliable’ (*ṣaḥīḥ*) collections, though the scholars who wrote them admitted that even these could contain unreliable *ḥadīth* reports.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, when we look at the reliable books of *ḥadīth*, we get a clear picture of the Prophet Muhammad as a man who disliked any kind of violence, and absolutely despised domestic violence. With respect to violence in general, the Prophet Muhammad was reported to have said, “A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands [other] Muslims are safe.”<sup>2</sup> The Prophet himself was reported to have

served as a model against violence, as his wife ‘Ā’isha reported, “The Prophet never hit anyone with his hand, neither a servant nor a woman.” He was especially clear about violence against women in his clear prohibition, “Do not hit the maidservants of God.” Beyond physical violence, the Prophet raised the bar by never committing verbal violence, “The Prophet never used bad language toward lewd persons. He used to say, “The best of you are those who have the best manners and character. And the best of you are those who are best to your wives.”

It is clear that the Prophet was trying to create a new model of masculinity that moved away from violence. In contrast to prevailing notions of masculinity, in which manliness was measured by strength and anger, the Prophet said, “the strong man is not the one who wrestles well, but the strong man is one who can control himself while in a fit of rage.” This new, Islamic conception of masculinity involved checking one’s temper and espousing non-violence as a general rule. It also involved a new vision of gender relations in which ideal masculinity was no longer found in men dominating women, but rather in men working toward gender equality, even against societal expectations.

To this end, the Prophet counseled men to take an active role in empowering women as equals. He was reported to have said, “women are the twin halves of men”, establishing parity between the genders, and that “the best believers are

1 See Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Hādī al-Sārī: Muqaddima Fatḥ al-Bārī* (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1963).

2 The *ḥadīth* discussed in this section have been discussed extensively in scholarly articles; see for example Kecia Ali, “A Beautiful Example’: The Prophet Muhammad as a Model for Muslim Husbands” *Islamic Studies* 43(2): 273-91; Ayesha S. Chaudhry, “I Wanted One Thing and God Wanted Another: The dilemma of the Prophetic example and the Qur’anic Injunction on Wife-Beating” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39(3): 416-39.

those who are best to women”; thus making men’s spiritual perfection contingent on their support for women and their rights. Beyond simply prohibiting domestic violence, the Prophet was creating a society in which believers worked toward equality for all, especially between men and women. Believers were commanded to identify oppressive practices and root them out, and men in particular were commanded to work against any policies or practices that disadvantaged women or unfairly advantaged men.

The Prophet embodied the Qur’anic ethos and its prohibitions against violence, its calls for gender equality, and its re-conception of masculinity. It should come as no surprise, then, that he strictly prohibited domestic violence. It is inconceivable that the Qur’an and the Prophet, with their many affirmations of gender equality, could encourage believers to subordinate women in any way, let alone hit

them. Yet, Muslims in the past found a way to read violence against women into the Qur’an and into the practice of Muhammad. This required a selective reading of texts in which the overt gender-egalitarianism of the scriptural texts was stripped away, and in which the scriptures were re-read to promote a vision of masculinity in which men dominate women, and believers are divided against one another based on gender. This manifested itself in the writings of many Muslims throughout history, and their writings permeate many Muslim cultures today. To combat these readings that violate the gender-egalitarian spirit of the Qur’an and the Prophet, we will need to see how Muslims living centuries after the time of the Prophet read male-dominance into scriptural texts, understand how their readings were adopted by certain segments of the Muslim community, and then counteract them through a return to the original Qur’anic and Prophetic spirit.

## CORRUPTING THE MESSAGE

The early Muslim community tried to practice and promote the values contained in the Qur'an and in the Prophet's example. They lived simple lives and embodied an ethic that was geared toward human flourishing. Women were in the vanguard of this movement; they were community leaders, teachers, and even heads of armies. In a short time, the Muslim community expanded geographically to include North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, and slowly many of the residents of those lands converted to Islam. These new Muslims brought with them cultures that often clashed with the austere piety of the early Muslim community, having a particularly tough time with the gender-egalitarian spirit and Islamic masculinity promoted by the Qur'an and the Prophetic example.

These new Muslims came from cultures in which women were expected to be subordinate to men, and in which males were expected to behave according to what is known as 'hegemonic masculinity'; a kind of domineering, aggressive, male-centered way of being. In these societies, men treated women more like property, and they assumed that husbands had the right to hit their wives. Rather than adopt the Islamic masculinity of the Qur'an and the Prophet, these new Muslims began to read patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity into Islamic texts. Despite the Qur'an's insistence on giving women 'rights equal to those [of men]' (Q. 2:228), and the Prophet's repeated calls to treat women as

'the twin halves of men', Muslims in this new context introduced a hierarchy in which men were dominant over women.

This hierarchy expressed itself in many ways, but perhaps the most egregious has to do with domestic violence. Some Muslims began to read the marital reconciliation verse, Q. 4:34, as a license to hit wives. Rather than reading the verse in its most obvious sense—"engage in mutual consultation, separate from the marital bed, and (finally) walk away from them"—, some Muslims started to read the verse to say, "admonish them, abandon them in their beds, and beat them."

Of course, that new reading goes against other verses in the Qur'an that prohibit Muslims from harming one another, and also against clear dictates from the Prophet, including his statement, "Do not hit the maidservants of God." However, the new reading became popular since it fit with dominant ideas in new Muslim lands about hegemonic masculinity and the role of men and women in society. This new reading meant that men would be dominant over women, that men had exclusive rights and privileges, and that they would be unaccountable for their actions within the marriage, even if that meant hitting their wives.

There were some Muslim scholars who resisted this new reading. Several scholars said the Muslims should never hit their wives, and that the Prophet detested domestic violence of any

kind. Yet, even these scholars ultimately upheld male dominance, and fell short of repeating the Prophet's blanket prohibition against domestic violence. To do this, they had to either re-interpret or conveniently ignore Qur'anic verses and *ḥadīth* that demanded that women be treated equally. In their writings, gender-egalitarianism and the Prophet's ideas about masculinity were consistently undermined, women's inequality became a virtue, and hegemonic masculinity became the norm. Muslim communities, like those in much of the rest of the world, began to create institutions and laws that systematically disenfranchised women, thinking that by doing so they were performing a social good.

In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, however, Muslims started noticing that there was a sharp disconnect between the message of the Qur'an and the Prophet on the one hand, and Muslim practice on the other. Literacy rates in the Muslim world skyrocketed and women became increasingly involved in public affairs. Muslims began to read the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* in growing numbers, and they saw that the values contained therein were not reflected in their societies or in the writings of Muslim scholars. In fact, they began to see that a male elite had subverted the gender-egalitarianism of the Qur'an and the Prophetic example to create a society in which women were denied even basic rights, let alone empowered to have equal status to men.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, Muslim men and women conducted a comprehensive project to restore the rights given to women in Islam, but denied to them over the centuries. These scholars discussed how hegemonic masculinity was read into Islamic texts, and they worked to restore the original, gender-egalitarian ethos of the early Muslim community. They affirmed,

for instance, that Q. 4:34 does not sanction domestic violence, nor does the Qur'an condone any level of violence against fellow believers. They returned to the Prophetic example to demonstrate that Muhammad championed women's rights, categorically forbade domestic violence, and promoted an Islamic masculinity that moved away from aggression and toward equal rights.

Scholars working in this vein have produced a trove of scholarly material, both attesting to the many historical attempts to read patriarchy into Islamic texts, as well as attempts to re-capture their original egalitarian spirit. These include Qur'an translations like Laleh Bakhtiar's, *The Sublime Qur'an*, Tahir-ul-Qadri's *Irfan-ul-Qur'an*, and Ahmed Ali's *al-Qur'an*, which all uphold gender-equal readings of the Qur'an. There are also multiple works on *ḥadīth* and their crucial role in promoting gender justice, such as Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's *Ḥadīth and Gender Justice*, or Nimat Barazangi's *Woman's Identity and Rethinking the Hadith*.<sup>3</sup> Finally, many scholars have written about how generations of male scholars corrupted the early Islamic message, such as Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*, Asma Barlas' *Believing Women in Islam*, Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* and Amina Wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad*.<sup>4</sup>

3 Nimat Barazangi (ed.) *Woman's Identity and Rethinking the Hadith* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Hadith and Gender Justice: Understanding the Prophetic Traditions* (Cirebon: Fahima Institute, 2007). See also Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, "Gender Equality and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: Reinterpreting the Concepts of Mahram and Qiwama," in Z. Mir-Hosseini et al (eds), *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 170-8; Ayesha S. Chaudhry, "Producing Gender-Egalitarian Islamic Law: A Case Study of Guardianship (*Wilayah*) in Prophetic Practice" in Z. Mir-Hosseini et al, *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2015), pp. 88-105.

4 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpre-*

On the whole, it seems that these scholarly works have been highly compelling for Muslims the world over. Almost every Muslim country has adopted anti-domestic violence legislation, including Saudi Arabia, which is known for having many repressive gender laws. On the issue of domestic violence, the Saudi law criminalizes any type of ‘harm’ that may be perpetrated by one spouse upon another, whether that be “exploitation, or physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, or the threat of it.”<sup>5</sup> In North America, every major Muslim organization has delivered an unequivocal condemnation of domestic violence as antithetical to Islamic values, including the Islamic Society of North America,<sup>6</sup> the Islamic

Circle of North America,<sup>7</sup> and the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada.<sup>8</sup> Over twenty national and regional organizations in Canada proclaimed that Muslims should adopt a “zero tolerance” policy when it comes to domestic violence.<sup>9</sup> Prominent North American Muslim leaders speak out about domestic violence with regularity, and they confirm that any reading of Islamic texts that permits any kind of spousal abuse is a gross misreading of the Qur’an.

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*tation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (Perseus Books, 1992); see also Omaima Abou-Bakr, “The Interpretive Legacy of *Qiwamah* as an Exegetical Construct” in Z. Mir-Hosseini et al, *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2015), pp. 44-64; Ayesha S. Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law, and the Muslim Discourse on Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

- 5 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Law of Protection from Abuse: Royal Decree No. M/52* (21 September 2013), <http://www.nfsp.org.sa/index.php/component/phocadownload/category/1-2011-12-18-06-21-17?download=147:lawenglish> (last accessed July 14, 2016).
- 6 Ali, Mohamed Hagmagid, *Responding to the Killing of Aasiya Hassan: An Open Letter to the Leaders of American Muslim Communities* (n.d.), [http://www.mwusa.org/topics/violence&harrasment/letter\\_american\\_muslim\\_community\\_aasyia.html](http://www.mwusa.org/topics/violence&harrasment/letter_american_muslim_community_aasyia.html) (last accessed July 12, 2016).

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- 7 Rahman, Mahbubur, *Domestic Violence—A Devilish Practice* (n.d.), <https://www.icna.org/domestic-violence-a-devilish-practice/> (last accessed July 12, 2016).

- 8 Islamic Supreme Council of Canada, *Fatwā: Honor Killings, Domestic Violence and Misogyny are Un-Islamic and Major Crimes* (4 February 2012), available at <http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.com/fatwā-honour-killings-misogyny-domestic-violence.pdf> (last accessed 22 January 2013).

- 9 Council on American Islamic Relations, *Canada: 20 Muslim Groups Urge ‘Zero Tolerance’ for Domestic Violence* (11 March 2015), <https://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/2842-canada-20-muslim-groups-urge-zero-tolerance-for-domestic-violence.html> (last accessed July 12, 2016).

# OVERTURNING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Despite these initiatives on the part of state actors, national organizations, and prominent Muslim leaders to condemn domestic violence, the reported rates of physical and psychological abuse in Muslim communities are staggeringly high. A report from the Sakinah Project, which conducted over 800 in-depth interviews with Muslims in communities across North America, suggests that 31% of North American Muslim women experience physical abuse in their marriages.<sup>10</sup> This means that approximately one in every three Muslim women in North America is a victim of domestic abuse. These numbers, shocking as they are, tell us two things. First, domestic violence is a very real and pervasive problem in Muslim communities in North America. Second, given the widespread condemnation of domestic violence by major Muslim organizations as antithetical to Islam, as well as the widespread recognition of the egalitarian spirit of Islamic scriptural texts and the early Muslim community, Islam and Islamic texts are not the problem.

Rather, the problem is much deeper and cannot be resolved by calling on scriptural texts and issuing condemnations alone. Recall that the original prophetic message was one that promoted a unique vision of Islamic masculinity

<sup>10</sup> The statistics for this project and others can be found here: <http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/statistics-2/>. For a metastudy of Intimate Partner Violence studies amongst Muslims globally, see D. Jayasundara, R. Nedegaard, B. Sharma, and K. Flanagan, "Intimate Partner Violence in Muslim Communities", *American Social Sciences Journal* (2014) S1:003.

and radical gender-equality that was, over time, contorted into hegemonic masculinity and women's disempowerment by generations of male scholars. These scholars not only introduced readings that moved away from the original spirit of the Qur'an and the Prophet, but also created institutions and practices that disempowered women. Muslims have worked hard to recover the original spirit of scriptural texts, but have yet to contend with the institutions and attitudes resulting from centuries-long efforts to equate Islam with male-dominance.

The problem of domestic violence is inextricably linked to an institutional mindset in which men feel a kind of ownership over women.<sup>11</sup> This mindset begins at an early age and is reinforced by both overt and subtle messages that the community sends about masculinity and femininity.<sup>12</sup> These include ideas about women being subordinate to men, men having financial rights over women, and men having exclusive decision-making powers in the family and in the community. Even though these ideas go directly against the Qur'anic ethos of equality and the Prophet's conception of Islamic masculinity, they are deeply ingrained in popular Muslim practice

<sup>11</sup> F. Shaheed, "The Cultural Articulation of Patriarchy: Legal Systems, Islam and Women" *South Asia Bulletin* (1986), 6(1): 38-44.

<sup>12</sup> This view is known as the 'Social-Ecological' model for violence prevention, see L. Dahlberg and E. Krug, "Violence—A Global Public Health Problem" in E. Krug et al (eds) *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002), pp. 1-56. The Social-Ecological model is endorsed by major groups like the World Health Organization and the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention as key for addressing domestic violence at its root.



and must be rooted out. Truly combating domestic violence will require sermons and workshops in which Muslim men and boys are taught not only that domestic violence is an un-Islamic practice, but that Islamic masculinity is found in championing women's rights.

So long as hegemonic masculinity is taught to men and boys through male-centered institutions and practices that marginalize women, domestic violence will remain an entrenched problem. Research has demonstrated that in order to truly combat domestic violence, men must be taught that Islam ensures that men and women have equal access to community institutions, equal ability to be financially independent, and equal inclusion in community decision-making.<sup>13</sup> When Muslim men work with Muslim women as full and equal citizens of the community with equal rights, then the hegemonic masculinity that leads to problems like domestic violence will be severely undermined.

Religious sources must therefore be marshaled to demonstrate that Islamic masculinity requires Muslim men struggle to enshrine these rights for women, so that the community as a whole can work toward emulating the Qur'anic and Prophetic ideals of gender-egalitarianism in all spheres of community and personal life. Below, we have described how the Qur'an, the Prophet, and the early Muslim community embodied the ideals of Islamic masculinity and gender-egalitarianism. This is meant to be a foundation

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<sup>13</sup> The research is overwhelming and has been demonstrated across cultures. See for example Judy Aulette and Judith Wittner, *Gendered Worlds 2<sup>nd</sup> edn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially Chapter 8; Mohammed Baobaid, "Masculinity and Gender Violence in Yemen" in Lahoucine Ouzgane (ed.) *Islamic Masculinities* (London: Zed Books, 2006) pp. 161-183; Rafia M. Hamid, "Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities" in Andy J. Johnson (ed.) *Religion and Men's Violence Against Women* (New York: Springer, 2015) pp. 319-342.

for further conversation within communities, so that they can discuss how to best reflect the visions contained therein.

## EQUAL ACCESS

Muslim public spaces in the time of the Prophet were places to which all members of the community—men and women—had equal access. Women and men would engage in the marketplace, and, importantly, would share the mosque space. Whereas today many mosques are male-dominated, reserving the most beautiful and largest spaces for men, the Prophet's mosque was accessible to both men and women. Women were not secluded; rather, they prayed in the same space as men. The Prophet instructed his community members to conduct themselves respectfully and asked women and men to be each other's allies.

Tellingly, the Prophet put most of the burden of respectful behavior on men. He encouraged men to speak respectfully to women, not to leer or make women feel uncomfortable, and to honor women's dignity as equal human beings. The Prophet insisted that the ideal community was one in which men and women would be fully engaged with mutual respect. Women were not barred from any public space, nor were they barred from any part of the mosque. The Prophet issued special warnings against limiting women's access to the mosque, saying, "do not prevent women from going to the mosque." Today, however, most mosques relegate women to unsavory spaces, and that is when women are given any space at all. A Tumblr blog, titled "Side Entrance" ([sideentrance.tumblr.com](http://sideentrance.tumblr.com)), catalogues the widespread practice of barring women from entering the mosque from the front door. The

blog contains a cavalcade of depressing pictures that bear witness to the decrepit state of most women's spaces in mosques.

Unsurprisingly, this architectural devaluing of women sends a strong signal about their devalued status in the Muslim community, and leads to their devaluation in the family. Muslim organizations have noted this sad state of affairs, and have encouraged mosques to ensure that women have equal access. The Islamic Society of North America released a religious edict affirming that the Prophet's mosque embraced men and women, and rightly puts the burden on men—who have more power than women in these spaces—to ensure that women have full access to the mosque and its leadership structures.<sup>14</sup> Since the Prophet's mosque had no barriers impeding women's access, men must take the lead in ensuring that women's equal value in Islam is reflected in mosque spaces.

## ECONOMIC EQUALITY

The Prophet's community empowered women economically far before its counterparts in the rest of the world. Women in his community engaged in business dealings, were apportioned inheritance, owned property, and amassed wealth under their own names. Women did not need men's approval for their business dealings, and were not accountable to men for how they spent their money. This is in direct contrast to notions of hegemonic masculinity in which men control the family finances, especially in the case of female family members. The Prophet's community subverted that paradigm with an Islamic masculinity that promoted women's economic empowerment.

<sup>14</sup> Islamic Society of North America, *ISNA Statement on the Inclusion of Women in Masjids* (4 September 2015), <http://www.isna.net/isna-statement.html> (last accessed July 12, 2016).

Today, however, many Muslim women in North America state that they have no control over their finances, and that men make all of their financial decisions. This puts women at the mercy of their male family members. Women must be educated as to the financial rights given to them by their religion and by their society. Men and boys must be taught that the Prophet encouraged financial independence for women, and thus controlling a woman's finances is antithetical to the Islamic spirit. Money is power, and to truly emulate the Prophet's community, men and women must be equally empowered to pursue and control their financial futures.

## DECISION-MAKING

Women are often excluded from positions of power within the mosque, and they are not proportionally represented on mosque boards. Their views, therefore, are not taken into account when mosque policies are developed, and they are relegated to observer, rather than participant status. This, again, is largely due to ideas about hegemonic masculinity that developed over the ages, but which go against the prophetic model.

The Prophet regularly consulted women when making his decisions. He considered women full members of the community, and would include them in all significant deliberations. One of the most important of these resulted in the landmark Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, which was a crucial peace treaty between the Prophet and the Meccans who had declared war on him. When male members of the Prophet's community grumbled against the treaty, the Prophet took his wife's counsel, and concluded a pact that secured the Muslim community's future, and which the Qur'an describes as "the



Clear Victory.” (Q. 48:1) There are numerous recorded instances of the Prophet consulting women, appointing them to lead communities, and following their counsel. Indeed, the Qur’an commands Muslims to consult one another in their major decisions (Q. 42:38), and so the Prophet was simply enacting this command. However, years of male-centered interpretations of Islam’s foundational texts have led to the assumption that consultation and decision-making is the sole purview of Muslim males.

As a result, Muslim males are now the predominant decision-makers in communities, thus going against the Prophetic paradigm. Given the male-centered model of decision-making that is modeled in many mosques, it is not surprising that many Muslim women

report having lesser decision-making powers in their families when compared to men.<sup>15</sup> This type of disempowerment creates the conditions in which domestic violence can occur, and undermines the Islamic message. Men must be especially careful to ensure that women are equal decision-makers in the community, and must give up the unearned and undeserved power and privilege afforded to them by society and by years of male-centered readings of Islamic texts.

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15 Muhammad Ahsan, “Women and Human Development in the Muslim World: Reflections on Islamic and UNDP’s Approaches” in Terence Lovat (ed.), *Women in Islam: Reflections on Historical and Contemporary Research* (New York: Springer, 2012) pp. 43-60.

# MOVING FORWARD

**M**ales hold most of the positions of authority in Muslim communities, and so they are going to need to take the lead in combating domestic violence both rhetorically and in practice. They must promote Islamic masculinity within communities and within families. When the community embraces the Islamic model of masculinity in which men struggle for women's equality, then the original, gender-equal readings of the Qur'an will begin to be actualized. When men are taught that women are full and equal partners in the community, and mold their experiences to mirror that knowledge, then they will embody the belief that men and women should be equal partners in all spheres of life. Once so embodied, it will make no sense for men to have power over women, and it will certainly make no sense for them to have the right to cause them any harm, just as men do not have power over, nor the right to harm, any other member of the community.

What will be required from religious leaders and community members, then, is a two-pronged approach to combating domestic violence. First, Muslim leaders must continue to teach their communities that there is no place in Islam for domestic violence, that the Qur'an and the Prophet condemn patriarchy, and that any readings to the contrary are corruptions of the original message. Second, the Islamic masculinity of the Prophet's community must become part of religious rhetoric and practice,

such that Muslim masculinity is understood to be a struggle against institutions and practices that disempower women. Muslim communities must affirm and model the Prophetic ethos in which women are empowered socially, economically, and politically. This will address the underlying pernicious attitudes that lead to women's disempowerment in general, and to domestic violence in particular.

This will require regular conversations amongst community members and regular re-enforcement from community leaders. To aid this process, we have provided twelve discussion topics through which Muslim communities can explore and discuss how better to emulate the Qur'anic and Prophetic model. They are:

## **1. The Qur'anic Message on Gender Equality**

The Qur'an links radical monotheism with the radical equality of all humans before God, regardless of social distinctions, like race, class, gender, etc. The Qur'an recognizes that people are created with varied lineages, cultures, and genders, but portrays these differences as a "test". The Qur'an states that God created humans in various tribes and nations so that they may "know" one another, and these distinctions are meant to increase our appreciation for each other, not discriminate due to such differences (Q. 49:13). This verse states further, "Indeed, the most noble amongst

you is the one who is most righteous.” This means that humans can be distinguished from one another based only on piety and righteousness, but these are qualities that can only be measured by God. Hence, only God has the right to distinguish between human beings.

Believers are encouraged to not be distracted by these shallow differences, vesting too much meaning in them and creating hierarchies based on them, and making some people into Lords over others. Instead, these differences are meant to celebrate God’s creativity and the fact that all humans have equal worth. This intrinsic human worth aligns with the principle of universal human rights, which advocates against discrimination based on race, gender, religion, class, etc. This idea of eliminating social difference coupled with the Qur’an’s repeated message about valuing the labor of women and men equally, and the fact that believing men and women are each other’s allies, illustrate the Qur’anic message of gender equality.

## **2. The Qur’anic Message on Islamic Masculinity**

Men are often taught that success is found in achieving more and more power, whether that power is primarily political, economic, or social. And so, men are frequently found competing with one another in a race for greater power. The Qur’an, however, changes the definition of success, pointing out that truly successful men are those who race and compete in goodness (*khayrāt*) (Q. 2:148, 23:61) and patience (Q. 3:200). This goodness is found not in gaining power, but in serving those without power and lifting them up to equal footing (Q. 2:177, 90:11-18, and many more).

Thus, the Qur’an rails against slavery, misogyny, and patriarchy, and in Q. 2:228 demands that men work against the structures that disempower women, and work toward gender equality. This will result in an ideal Qur’anic society, in which men and women are protectors of one another (Q. 9:71), in which men and women’s labor is valued equally (Q. 4:124; see also 3:195, 16:97, and 57:12), and in which men and women are considered fully equal creations of God (Q. 4:1, 33:35, 40:40, 49:13, and many others). Achieving this society requires men to leave off competing for power and dominance, and to embrace Islamic masculinity in which a man’s worth is found in his dedication to creating a world in which all of God’s creatures are treated with equity.

## **3. The Prophetic Message on Gender Equality**

The Prophet’s example is replete with the promotion of gender equality. The very story of his prophethood is embedded in a story that subverts patriarchal gender norms. He met his first wife Khadijah as her employee. She hired him, proposed to him, believed in his prophethood, was the first convert to Islam, and financially supported his prophetic mission. Even when Muhammad was polygamous, he did not overshadow his wives, they maintained their own identities and actively participated in the life of the early community. After his death, the Prophet’s wives became prominent religious and political figures. This is especially true for ‘Ā’isha, who also became a military leader and one of the most prolific transmitters of prophetic reports (*ḥadīth*).

The prophet encouraged women to participate in the communal life of the Muslim community by having them come to the mosque regularly. Importantly, he realized that he needed to address men and boys when he did this, saying, “Do not prohibit the maidservants of God from attending the House of God (mosque)”. He demonstrated women’s political agency when he included them as participants in his political oath, which is captured in the Qur’anic text (Q. 60:12).

#### 4. The Prophet’s Model of Masculinity

Numerous *ḥadīth* document the Prophet’s vision of manhood; a vision that challenges widely held notions of masculinity. The Prophet encouraged men to control their tempers, to struggle against their own desires, and to elevate the needs of others above themselves. He stressed the equality of all peoples, and that strong belief is reflected in a commitment to empower those in a weaker social position, including women. This meant that believing men must relinquish exclusive claims to power, and that they should share power and work with women, breaking down the barriers between stereotypical ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’.

To this end, the Prophet did the laundry and cleaned his home, he made joint decisions through consultation with family members, and he appointed women to positions of authority. The Prophet created a new vision of masculinity in which strong men work against any desires to dominate, and instead work toward empowerment and equality of women.

#### 5. Combating Corrupt Readings of the Scriptural Texts

The Qur’an and the Prophet both came with a message of radical equality, breaking down artificial distinctions that humans impose upon one another. Instead of being treated differently based on race, class, gender, social standing, or lineage, the Islamic message in these texts taught that human beings are one family, and that the only thing that distinguishes individuals is God-consciousness (*taqwa*). Over time, however, Muslims introduced artificial distinctions into their readings of scripture, and they corrupted the scripture to make these distinctions even more pronounced.

Muslims must now work to place *taqwa* back at the center of the Qur’anic and prophetic traditions. The word *taqwa* literally means, “to save oneself from” as in Q. 2:201 and 66:6. Believers are tasked with saving the Qur’an and the *sunna* from corrupt interpretations that create artificial distinctions between human beings, and are charged with saving the Muslim community from accepting these distinctions at face value. Whenever sharp distinctions are posited between people, like the segregation and oppression of women, believers must know that they do not stem from the Qur’an and *sunna*, and must save themselves and the scriptures from corrupt readings and practices that threaten to thwart the quest to embody *taqwa*.

#### 6. Combating Hegemonic Masculinity in Muslim Traditions

Islam brings with it a challenge to transcend base desires and to actualize one’s best self in order to realize a world of equality and justice. This aspiration runs counter to many deeply entrenched cultures in

which the powerful dominate the weak, and in which men dominate women. Some of these cultural ideas about dominance have seeped into Muslim discourse, so that today some people assume that Islam itself encourages inequality and gender injustice. Muslims are now tasked with separating out these cultural innovations from the Islamic tradition, and reaffirming the egalitarian impulse of Islam. This impulse has always been present in the works of Muslim scholars throughout history, and believers must showcase the egalitarian historical tradition in order to combat the cultural baggage that threatens to harm vulnerable members of the community and malign the name of Islam.

#### **7. An Islamic Model for Managing Marital Disputes**

Before the advent of Islam, women were severely undervalued in Arabian society. Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the status of women in pre-Islamic Arabian society was the practice of female infanticide. Girls were so undesirable and seen as such a burden to their families, that many families killed their daughters as soon as they were born. This practice is abhorred and prohibited in the Qur'an (Q. 81:8-9, 6:151). Instead, Islam – through the Qur'an and prophetic practice – offered a model for treating women as full members of society, starting from the family and expanding out to public roles. In the context of family life, the Qur'an offers concrete steps for managing marital disputes. This is important because a marital dispute occurs when partners in a marriage disagree about something, meaning that both husbands and wives assert their independent wills against each other. It is significant that the Qur'an

provides a space for women to express their own will in contradiction to men and then offers a methodology for addressing such dispute, treating both parties as equal partners in the relationship.

The Qur'an advises that when couples find themselves in a dispute, they try to resolve the problem between themselves. First, they are encouraged to engage in mutual consultation, and communicate their perspectives to each other. Second, they are advised to separate from the marital bed so that they can think about the issue at hand in isolation from their sexual relationship. Third, they are encouraged to separate from each other, perhaps in separate houses altogether, as the Prophet himself did when he was in a dispute with his wives. The couple is encouraged to thereby take some time alone and think about what is at stake as they resolve their dispute. If all of these measures fail to bring out reconciliation, then the couple is advised to engage in arbitration, and then divorce proceedings, but the Qur'an makes clear here that both parties ought to have representation, emphasizing the right of women to have legal representation alongside men.

#### **8. Islam and Domestic Violence**

Some Muslims argue that husbands have the right to physically discipline their wives. Islamophobes latch onto this idea and denigrate Islam and Muslims by saying that Muslims permit wife-beating. However, Muslim scholars have made a strong case that Islam does not permit domestic violence of any sort, including intimate partner violence. If all humans have equal worth before God and we are called on to treat humans equally irrespective of race, class,

and gender, then it makes no sense for men to have arbitrary power and privilege over their wives, and it is certainly unacceptable for husbands to hit their wives. Even socially conservative and religiously orthodox countries like Saudi Arabia have instituted domestic violence laws, prohibiting domestic violence of any sort.

The Prophet embodied the message of the Qur'an in this respect, never hitting his wives and instructing men to not hit their wives. Violence does not resolve problems, and in fact, only escalates marital disputes. In contrast, the Qur'an calls on couples to communicate, be reflective, and to de-escalate conflict.

#### **9. Islam and Women's Access to the Mosque**

Perhaps the most radically egalitarian space in Islam is the mosque. The archetypal mosque is in Mecca, where men and women stand side-by-side and pray to the House of God. The idea of standing side-by-side, equal in humanity, equal before God, without any hierarchy between humans is a powerful idea. Women and men stand next to each other, erasing gender hierarchies. The rich and poor stand next to each other, erasing class hierarchies. People of different races stand next to each other, erasing racial hierarchies. In standing next to each other in prayer, Muslims understand that social differences and institutionalized discriminatory practices are aberrations that ought to be resisted and fought against. The Prophet's mosque in Medina was a central communal space, it was ringed by the living quarters of Muhammad's wives, so that his wives had full access to the mosque. Men and women prayed without a barrier separating one another. The fact that this

equality between women and men was architecturally captured is significant. Today, many mosques are male-only spaces that do not even accommodate women. Many more relegate women to marginal spaces, where they are unseen and unheard, architecturally demonstrating how little women are valued in such communities. When men pray in spaces that discriminate against women, they enable and participate in the discrimination of women. It is necessary for everyone, but especially for men and boys who are privileged in the very spaces that disadvantage women to open up male-exclusive spaces and make women welcome and equal participants in them.

#### **10. Islam and the Political Empowerment of Women**

The Qur'an broke down any hierarchy amongst men and women in political leadership by stating that women and men are "protectors, one of another" (9:71). Women and men are thereby granted equal political authority, as was demonstrated in the practice of the Prophet. Whether it was going out of his way to seek the counsel of women, or taking their oaths of citizenship, or appointing women as prayer leaders, the Prophet made sure to have women prominently represented. This practice continued after the Prophet's death, as his youngest wife led armies, as his daughter gave political commentary, and as women were respected teachers and political advisors throughout the Muslims world. Today, Muslim women have risen to highest political offices in the world, a right given to them by the Qur'an and the Prophet. We must ensure that our homes and our communities enshrine the rights to political authority and leadership that was given to

them by Islam if we are to hope to practice the Islamic message of respect, justice, and equality.

### **11. Islam and the Economic Empowerment of Women**

Patriarchal arrangements hurt men and women in various ways. The self-serving logic of patriarchy undervalues women's economic potential, prohibiting them from participating in economic enterprises and then seeing them as financial burdens because they cannot contribute to the household economy. The financial burden that women represent in societies where they are barred from participating in financial and public realms is one of the main reasons that women were killed at birth in pre-Islamic Arabia. Islam addressed the issue of women's financial disempowerment directly when prohibiting female infanticide. Q. 6:151 states that girls should not be killed for fear of the financial burden they represent.

Additionally, the Qur'an gave women the right to inheritance, the right to enter and bear witness in financial contracts, and in general improved their economic status. The discussion of gender equality, without economic equality, is meaningless. Since money is power, treating women and men equally means empowering them both

financially so one is not dependent on the other. It is important to empower women financially in the household, in mosque communities, and beyond.

### **12. Islam and Women's Right to Decision-Making**

Islam gave women the right to make independent decisions in all aspects of life. Women have the full right to choose their spouses, control their finances, be educated, work, and socialize without the approval of anyone, male or female. As the 'walking Qur'an', the Prophet would not make unilateral decisions in his family; rather, he would respect and honor women's rights to make their own decisions for themselves and to have joint decision-making power in the family. Women would debate with the Prophet on the finer points of Islamic law, and he would often abide by their arguments and decisions. The Prophet fought his male-centered society to give women these rights, and as heirs to the Prophet, believers must also ensure that women have the power to make independent, meaningful decisions for themselves, for their families, and for their communities.



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