

Men in Charge?

OK, now we come to an issue (or bull, as it were) that has more meat: the understanding that men are in charge of women, and have sway over them.

This concept floored me!

I come from a family of dyed in the wool individualists. My parents left their homes and struck out on their own, far from either family's influence. My mother always worked and was an integral part of the family fortunes. She wanted us, her three daughters, to be able to take care of ourselves, to have a means of making our own living and building our own lives.

The idea of a man being in charge of me just because he was a man was very foreign. It made no sense to me for my husband to be in charge, again just because he was a man.

However, this is very much in line with the teachings of the Bible. In Genesis 3:16 God tells Eve that her husband shall be her master:

*And to the woman He said,
I will make most severe
Your pangs in childbearing;
In pain shall you bear children.
Yet your urge shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you.”
(Genesis 3:16 - The Torah: The Five Books of Moses, 1992)*

At the same time, Genesis also contains a passage that makes it clear that men and women are equal:

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; males and female He created them. God blessed them

and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."

(Genesis 1:26-27 - The Torah: The Five Books of Moses)

In the New Testament, throughout Paul's epistles he makes it clear that women should be submissive to their husbands and their husbands should love and care for their wives. For example:

Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord because the husband is head of his wife....

Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself.

(1 Ephesians 5:21-23, 28 - New American Bible)

For me, coming from a non-religious background, this concept was almost offensive. As much as I wanted to skirt this issue, I could not. This is not just a cultural issue that has crept into the religion. This understanding in Islam comes from a solid Quranic source. Here is the first part of the "offending" verse as translated by Rashad Khalifa:

*The men are made responsible for the women,
and God has endowed them with certain qualities,
and made them the bread earners.*

*The righteous women will cheerfully accept this arrangement,
since it is God's commandment,*

and honor their husbands during their absence.

(Quran: The Final Testament 4:34 – first portion)

This doesn't seem too bad. After all, men have traditionally been the protectors of their families, and the bread earners. In those circumstances it makes sense that the protector should have the ultimate say. How else can he be the protector? If there is a danger and those you are trying to protect do not listen to you, you cannot protect them.

And Khalifa's footnote for men being responsible for the women makes sense to me:

This expression simply means that God is appointing the husband as "captain of the ship." Marriage is like a ship, and the captain runs it after due consultation with his officers. A believing wife readily accepts God's appointment, without mutiny.

When I honestly examine this concept, I have to say that it does not indicate inequality. In the United States we elect public officials, but no one would consider himself unequal to those officials. It is simply a matter of organizing the society in a manner that works.

I'm not certain exactly what happens in a situation where the woman is working outside of the home. Personally, it seems that in such a situation, she is no longer in a protected position. She also is facing the dangers and stresses of the working world. However, the need for an organizational leader still exists, and for whatever reasons, God has specified that to be the husband.

Actually, there is a growing body of scientific evidence that there are some basic biological differences between the sexes that better adapt them to different roles. For more information on this see, for instance, *BRAIN SEX: The real difference between men and women*, Anne Moir, Ph.D. and David Jessel, 1992. Also, *Sex on the Brain: The Biological Differences Between Men and Women*, Deborah Blum, 1998.

Certainly no one can argue that women are the bearers of children. As such, their role is critical for the society and very much honored in the Quran (as we will see later). And who would know better about these matters than God?

So far, I was satisfied that there is not a difference of equality in the Quran. Rather it is only an issue of the family's organization.

The rest of this verse was a bombshell for me though! Here it is from Yusuf Ali's translation:

*As to those women
On whose part ye fear*

*Disloyalty and ill-conduct,
Admonish them (first),
(Next), refuse to share their beds,
(And last) beat them (lightly);
But if they return to obedience,
Seek not against them
Means (of annoyance)....
(The Holy Quran IV:34 [4:34] – last portion)*

Okay, I accept that if you have a captain of the ship, he may sometimes need the means of keeping order, so to speak. But BEATING???

Fortunately, Rashad Khalifa's footnote calmed me considerably. (Please note that a *sura* is a chapter of the Quran.)

God prohibits wife-beating by using the best psychological approach. For example, if I don't want you to shop at Market X, I will ask you to shop at Market Y, then at Market Z, then, as a last resort, at Market X. This will effectively stop you from shopping at Market X, without insulting you. Similarly, God provides alternatives to wife-beating; reasoning with her first, then employing certain negative incentives. Remember that the theme of this *sura* is defending the women's rights and countering the prevalent oppression of women. Any interpretation of the verses of this *sura* must be in favor of the women. This *sura*'s theme is "protection of women."

This approach seems rational. If a righteous husband goes through all of these steps he will not end up beating his wife. Enough time will have passed to defuse the situation and both parties will have had the chance to rethink the problem.

I will never forget the horror of years ago hearing my Muslim neighbor through a thin apartment wall. He often shouted a lot, clearly verbally abusing his American wife and her daughter by a previous marriage. One night was much worse than usual. I believe that he finally got physical with his wife; she ended the marriage.

I wasn't going to take any chances. Believe me, when I remarried I made certain that my husband is someone I can trust to talk things out!

Perhaps that is a clue. Knowing that a husband can have that power, a believing woman needs to be especially careful about who she chooses to marry. If all women are careful to marry only men who will treat them with dignity, eventually abuse will die out. There is never any excuse for spouse abuse; however women can take an active part in protecting themselves by carefully choosing their spouses.

This requires that we take an active and reasoned role in our selection of a mate. No more quick courtships! You need to know someone for a good while, and in as many possible righteous circumstances as you can before you can really judge their suitability as a husband. The criteria for a good mate also change when one looks at it from this perspective. A man's spiritual, moral and emotional character becomes much more important than his looks or profession or standing in the community. In fact, they become the only really important things.

In truth, shouldn't that be the case? After all, we are choosing someone to be our lifetime companion, someone with whom to form a family. We are choosing someone who will be a big factor in our own spiritual growth, just as we will be a factor in their spiritual growth.

It's our own necks. Only we can take care of them.



Two beautiful sisters share their stories here. The first speaks of how God has provided a safety net for women. Thus, men may be in charge, but women are protected. The second speaks out at the glaring inequity she often sees in the way men are "in charge."

Amazing Grace

The grace of God as shown for me throughout my life has taught me directly His amazing grace for the female of the human species. The Quran in 36:6-10 speaks of people whose parents were never warned, and are therefore totally unaware.

Well, my biological parents seemed to be among those. As a result of their not knowing, or simply not following the guidance of God in the Quran, eleven children and at least one adult, my mother, endured hardships that could have been different. God knows best however, and had those things not happened, I would not have this experience to share with you.

The Quran instructs the male on the proper way to have more than one wife. When the criteria are followed, then women like my mother and her children can be properly cared for, and accepted in the society with dignity rather than dishonor. When the plans for marriage fail, the woman is still provided for, says the Quran. My mother as another wife could have been protected had she followed the Quran. She would not have had to literally give away her children to others who could and would provide for them. It cost her and the children. I was one of the six that were sent to be raised by someone else. Again, God knows best for each of us.

I finally did meet my mother and my ten other siblings just before attaining adulthood. God is amazing, the criteria of keeping the name of the child, as described in the Quran, did provide the link to my lineage when the time came. My name was my ID.

I was raised by the people that adopted me, at age two, as a Baptist. I began to study Islam shortly after marrying. I joined what was then the Nation of Islam under the leadership of the Honorable Elijah Muhammed. It was here that I came in direct contact with the idea of women being special, and therefore to be protected by the men of the family and the community. My husband who was "verbally" Muslim, was taught to be the bread-earner, and I stayed home to raise our children and manage our home. That was my job. Modesty was the dress code, but still even if I went to the park with the children, I was escorted for our protection.

I soon learned that I was studying about the Quran, rather than studying the Quran itself. I changed my mode of practice; I left the Nation, and joined what was the *Sunnah* of Islam.

[*Editor's note:* Traditional Muslims often refer to the practice of their faith as the *Sunnah*.] It was awhile before I recognized again that I was studying something other than the Quran. We studied the *Hadith* for an hour and then discussed those sayings as they related to our lives. Well, we would find no real answers for the problems we shared. I began to study the Quran finally, and to my surprise I found there were answers to women having rights, property, making judgments, and being witnesses, etc. Unfortunately, these were not answers the community was ready for. My own spouse of thirty-two years was not ready for them, and slowly began to leave the guidance of God. The result was a legal divorce initiated by me. When it became clear to me that he and I could not agree on following the guidance of the Quran only, I followed the Guidance and ended the marriage. I waited the four months as instructed in the Quran, and found that it corresponded with the waiting period of the courts. The children and I stayed in our home and were not mistreated. My former spouse was unable to provide for us, but God is quite sufficient. I kept my possessions as stated in the Quran, thus I have assets. The rules set in place by God became the "safety net" for me and my children.

Well, as time continued, my brothers and the believers assisted the children and me, again through the criteria of the Quran. The charity extended to us over those months allowed my children to never be deprived of the needs of everyday living. God is so amazing to me. To date there have been no offers of marriage from believing men that I felt were sanctioned by the Almighty. Surely God would compensate the male that could and would take on that responsibility. In spite of my circumstances, I reside safely within God's Amazing Grace and attempt to patiently wait on Him. I enhance the waiting by studying the Quran. Mainly I study alone, but when the opportunity arrives, I study with others. I relate to the concept of worshipping God alone in all of its contexts. I feel so very blessed to be allowed the knowledge of the Quran. God be ever praised, highly glorified is He. It has been my supreme pleas-

ure to be given an opportunity to communicate to you, and share what is probably many people's story. Perhaps some day I'll be allowed to share so those who have the same or a similar story can know that they are not alone, and we are blessed to have submitted to the design God ordained for our lives so that we would know Him with certainty. God's Grace is Amazing.

– *MeauVell, U.S.A.*



In Charge Or In Control?

My feelings about the way the concept of men being in charge in our world is summed up by a card sent to me by a friend. The picture shows six people sitting around a board table, only one of them a woman. The director is saying, "That's an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it."

I've always been told by the wise old women in my community that in order to get your way with a man, you must learn how to make what you want look like it is his idea. Many times I have not shared my opinion because I didn't want to be perceived as a troublemaker. So I formed the habit of denying my truth because I thought that was required to be a good Muslim woman.

I have witnessed that it is generally worse even than that in several Muslim societies. Not only are the opinions and wisdom of women ignored and denied, we know that in many Muslim countries (within your very religious communities) you very seldom see women out in public. Women must wear

the *shidowa*, and are covered completely from head to toe; even to see women's eyes is forbidden.

Back in the day of our Urban-based Muslim communities, we were apartment dwellers. It was always interesting to me how, when we had functions at various homes, though there were always more women and children than men, the men always had the nicest facilities and accommodations. The women were made to endure with the children behind the scenes somewhere in small cramped quarters. Even many of the *masjids* [mosques] require the women to occupy only the smallest rooms in the smallest areas.

As I traveled through the Middle East, it struck me that despite the blazing heat of many of these countries, it is a culturally accepted norm that women wear black and the men wear white. Now we all know how black attracts heat and I was wondering, "Why are the women having to wear this black. It's so hot!" I know that they have physicist and chemists in their society that can tell them that this is not comfortable. Could men survive in black, in such a hot terrain?

Despite God's elucidation in the Quran on the value and parity of women, I constantly struggle with the fact that Muslims have been acculturated to hate and deny the female. Instead of believing that God is neither male nor female, we act like we believe that God is only masculine and does not like anything female.

–JC, U.S.A.

