

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.

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 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 a president, but no one would consider himself unequal to that official. 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 earning as much or more than her husband. 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. Certainly no one can argue that women are the bearers of children. As such, their role is critical for the society, 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, but 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):
For God is Most High,
Great (above you all).
(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, God guided me to Rashad Khalifa's approach, which calmed me considerably. Here is his footnote. (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.