

Wife beating points to husband's ignorance of basic Islamic teachings

By DR MD MAHMUDUL HASAN - January 27, 2023 @ 8:01pm



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Even for people who are ready to defend Islam, the widely held interpretation of Quranic verse 4:34 causes discomfort and bewilderment. It is generally translated as follows:

[...] As to those women on whose part you fear disobedience and recalcitrance, (first) admonish them, (next) refuse to share their beds, and (last) "chastise" them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, do not seek against them any means of annoyance for God is Most High, Great (above you all).

Based on this verse, it is believed that a husband should follow three gradual steps of reconciliation to deal with his wife's 'ill-conduct': advising and admonishing her; separating her in the bed; and 'chastising/hitting' her.

Men rush to beat up their wives even for flimsy reasons and use this Quranic verse as a justification for what is known in the West as male-perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV). This leads many to associate Islam with misogyny, as actions of individual Muslims are conflated with the religion.

It is often forgotten that gendered domestic violence and abuse (DVA), or specifically intimate partner violence (IPV), transcends religious and national boundaries and that Muslim men do not have a monopoly on it.

The question of wife beating involving Quran 4:34 overshadows other Quranic verses — such as 2:229, 231; 4:1; 30:21; 33:49 — where God advises men to be kind and considerate to women. Moreover, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"No believing husband should hate his believing wife. Even if he hates one aspect of her character, [he should know] there are many commendable features of her character which he would like."

"I command you to be kind to women The best of you is the best to his family/wife and I am the best amongst you to my family."

"The perfect Muslims amongst you are those who possess good character. And the best among you are those who are best to their wives."

The Prophet strongly forbids husbands from mistreating their wives, stating:

"Some women visited my family complaining about their husbands beating them. Such husbands are not the best of you."

"How does anyone of you beat his wife as he beats the stallion camel and then he may embrace (sleep with) her?"

According to Quran 57:25, the very foundation of Islamic teachings is the primordial principle of justice, while Quran 17:70 affirms the dignity of human beings. Given the centrality of justice in Islam and its emphasis on kind treatment of wives and conferment of dignity on humans, it is difficult to reconcile that it permits husbands to hit their wives.

In his book titled 'Marital Discord: Recapturing the Full Islamic Spirit of Human Dignity' (2003), the late AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman — the second rector of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) — engages with this debate. He seeks to consider the underlying lexical and semantic aspects of the expression 'wa idriboo hunna' (and chastise them) that occurs in Quran 4:34 and which is the bone of contention in this regard.

Importantly, if the Arabic root verb 'daraba' in verse 4:34 is interpreted as 'chastisement or beating,' it will go against all the three basic principles of Islam: kind and compassionate conjugal relationship; justice in every sphere of human life; and dignity of human beings.

It is also important to remember that an Islamic ruling cannot be derived on the basis of only one Quranic verse or Prophetic narrative. Other related texts must also be considered.

Since the concept of wife beating goes against the Islamic precept of kindness to women and against the practices of the Prophet and his companions, AbuSulayman looks at other possible meanings of 'daraba' in Quran 4:34.

While one meaning of 'daraba' is to strike or hit, it has other meanings too. Its various derivatives occur in Quranic verses such as: 2:26; 2:61; 3:112; 4:94; 4:101; 16:74-76; 17:48; 18:11; 24:31; 43:5; 57:13; 66:11. In none of these places, 'daraba' means 'to beat up'. For example, in verses 4:94 and 4:101, it means 'to travel' or 'to go away'.

In the context of Quran 4:34, AbuSulayman believes that the word 'daraba' can take "several figurative or allegorical connotations which signify to isolate, to separate, to depart, to distance, to exclude, to move away, etc" (9).

He considers the connotative meaning of 'daraba' in verse 4:34 and argues that it points to a long separation between husband and wife as a strategy of resolving marital discord. In other words, when a wife refuses to rectify herself even after admonition and separation from her husband in the bed, then the third step that the Quran suggests is long separation between them, which may give her enough space to rethink and rectify.

If long separation does not work and she remains recalcitrant, then perhaps her refusal to correct herself is an indication of her lack of seriousness in the relationship and may lead to the dissolution of marriage. That is why, the next verse (Quran 4:35) talks about separation — with the possibility of reconciliation — between husband and wife. It states:

If you fear a rift between the two of them, appoint two arbiters: one from his family and another from hers; if they wish for peace, God will bring about their reconciliation: for God has full knowledge, and is (thoroughly) acquainted with all things.

In other words, if the wife does not show any sign of rectification even after the husband follows the three steps mentioned in verse 4:34, then the Quran recommends a fourth step, that is, either reconciliation or dissolution of marriage in an amicable way.

AbuSulayman's interpretation of 'daraba' in Quran 4:34 as long separation is consistent with the overall Islamic spirit and with the practice of Prophet Muhammad who never hit or battered any of his wives.

AbuSulayman mentions that, on one occasion, the Prophet faced rebellion from his wives. He stayed away from home for a month during which they realized their mistake and rectified themselves, and thus the marital discord was resolved.

If 'daraba' in Quran 4:34 had meant chastisement, Prophet Muhammad would have applied it and/or advised his companions to follow suit. There is no record to suggest that he did so.

Therefore, rendering 'daraba' in Quran 4:34 as chastisement is untenable. Conversely, understanding it as long separation is consistent with the spirit of gender egalitarianism that Islam promotes, with its emphasis on decent family life or amicable dissolution of marriage, and with the sunnah (practice) of the Prophet. Therefore, according to AbuSulayman, Quran 4:34 does not endorse or condone wife-beating.

This view is corroborated by other scholars of Islam. For example, in her book 'From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life' (2012), writer and former MTV Europe presenter, Kristiane Backer quotes the German Muslim convert scholar, Halima Krausen, stating:

I took the opportunity to ask Halima one pressing question that had been at the back of my mind for a long time: I wanted to know whether the Quran really legitimised men hitting their wives when they didn't obey them. Aghast, Halima pointed out that the Prophet strongly rebuked any husband who beat his wife. 'The Arabic word daraba, which is often translated as "beating", has many different meanings,' she explained, 'including to imprint, to explain with emphasis, to separate, to distance or to depart, basically a wake-up call. And, this should be the interpretation of this complex verb in the context of marriage,' she stressed.

In a journal article titled "A Critical Examination of Quran 4:34 and Its Relevance to Intimate Partner Violence in Muslim Families" (2010), academics Nada Ibrahim and Mohamad Abdalla of Australia's Griffith University establish "the invalidity of reading verse 4:34 as condoning wife beating" and maintain that "most of the cases of wife abuse [in Muslim society] can be explained by the husband's ignorance of the basic teachings of Islam on the kind and just treatment of women."

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