



Gender Uniqueness in Islam and the Significance of Fatherhood

MOHAMMAD ELSHINAWY

TAHIR KHWAJA

YAQeen™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Mohammad Elshinawy is a Graduate of English Literature at Brooklyn College, NYC. He studied at the College of Hadith at the Islamic University of Madinah and is a graduate and instructor of Islamic Studies at Mishkah University. He has translated major works for the International Islamic Publishing House, the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America, and Mishkah University.

Dr. Tahir Khwaja, MD ABPN, ABPN-CAP, ABIHM is a practicing psychiatrist with board certification in General and Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, along with Integrative and Holistic Medicine. He is currently affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs in Waco, Texas and was also affiliated with the Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine and James Madison University in Virginia before he relocated to Dallas. He subsequently completed an intensive year-long course in Arabic and then went on to begin his studies in Islamic Sciences at Qalam Institute as part of the Seminary Program. He is planning on furthering his Islamic education.

***Disclaimer:** The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2020. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy.

Prelude

During the Prophet's ﷺ era, it was revolutionary when the Qur'an and Sunnah demanded that men recognize women as their equals in human dignity,¹ inviolability,² eligibility for salvation,³ the pursuit of God's pleasure,⁴ and opportunities for societal contribution.⁵ As his most influential companion 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (rA) attested, "In *Jāhiliyah* (the era of pre-Islamic ignorance), we used to have no regard for women whatsoever. But when Islam came and Allah made mention of them, this caused us to realize that they have rights upon us..."⁶ This paradigm shift that 'Umar and the early Muslims experienced eventually spread around the globe, though for many societies outside of the Islamic civilization this shift took well over a thousand more years. However, these days it sometimes seems difficult to reconcile the understanding of women's rights with the distinctive qualities of each gender.⁷ The widespread assumption that males and females are essentially identical, with no consequential differences between them, has posed a major hindrance to achieving gender equity in our times. This paper evaluates that assumption and some of its perilous ramifications not just for women but also for the father-child relationship.

Gender differences

The notion of gender differences may be repugnant to some in these times but Islam demands that we recognize them as an important reality. Allah has said, "And the male is not like the female" (Qur'an 3:36). Refusal to acknowledge the differences that Allah created in the universe, including gender differences, is not

¹ Qur'an 49:13 and 17:70.

² Qur'an 81:8–9, 6:151, and 24:4.

³ Qur'an 9:72, 57:12, and 48:5.

⁴ Qur'an 4:124, 16:97, and 40:40.

⁵ Qur'an 9:71.

⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-maẓālīm, bāb al-ghurfah wa-al- 'ullīyah*, no. 5505.

⁷ Bruce Goldman, "Two Minds: The Cognitive Differences between Men and Women," *Stanford Medicine*, Spring 2017, <https://stanmed.stanford.edu/2017spring/how-mens-and-womens-brains-are-different.html>.

only contrary to sacred revealed truths, it also strikes at the very foundation of family and society.

Any discussion of gender differences in Islam should be prefaced by the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ words, “Women are the full siblings of men.”⁸ Al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 998, Allah bestow mercy on him) explains that among the intended meanings here is that any legal ruling in Islam applies to both males and females by default unless textual evidence exists to establish a difference.⁹ Some of these established differences fall within the ritual realm, such as women being exempted from prayer and fasting during their menses and postnatal period. Other differences fall within the social realm, such as interactions between men and women in society. Many Muslims and non-Muslims agree—explicitly or implicitly—that there are inherent differences between males and females, though they may disagree and experience intense anxiety over where those differences may fall, what they may mean, and how to establish justice in light of them. For Muslims, whose ultimate reference point is the Creator of males and females (not the subjectivity of secular humanism), the Most Just who tasked humanity with upholding justice, it should be expected that certain elementary truths about existence, our human natures, and our respective rights and responsibilities be clearly defined just as they are in the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah (prophetic tradition).

Perhaps the single greatest challenge to acknowledging gender differences today is the tendency in modern societies to measure the worth of women by comparing them to men, rather than to the best possible versions of themselves (their own maximum potential). The negative social, psychological, and emotional impacts of this misguided comparison are grim. Encouraging women to assess their self-worth in comparison to men is a tremendous disservice to women and society because it is based on the belief that men's work is more valuable than women's work. What such thinking has actually done is set the male as the ideal towards which men and women should both aspire. A woman who aspires to be like men, as her ideal, not only erodes her feminine strengths but, in a tragic irony, makes her chase after goals often set by and for men. Whether it be a woman toiling to become a US

⁸ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 5869; *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 105; *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 204, authenticated by al-Albānī in *al-Silsilah al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1996), 6:860, no. 2862.

⁹ Al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma'ālim al-Sunan*, vol. 1 (Aleppo: al-Maṭba'ah al-'Ilmīyah, 1932), 79.

Marine¹⁰ or other attempts that try to deny any differences between the sexes, these strivings involve living in another's shadow.

Islam offers a far more meaningful liberation to women by insisting that women are inherently valuable and make uniquely feminine contributions without which a healthy society could not thrive. When pre-Islamic Arabs used to bury their infant girls alive, considering them a shameful liability (in comparison to boys who could fight and earn), the Prophet ﷺ did not defend the cause of women by validating the faulty metric used by society at the time. He ﷺ did not argue that women should be honored because they were just as able-bodied as men in battle or because they could bring about just as much economic benefit for the tribe as men. Instead, he insisted that they be valued for their distinct nature. He ﷺ reminded us of kindness towards our mothers thrice before our fathers, and the Qur'an highlights how celebrating mothers is justified by virtue of the work they do carrying, delivering, nursing, and weaning their children (Qur'an 31:14, 46:15). He ﷺ taught that raising two daughters diligently would grant a person nearness to God's greatest prophet in Paradise¹¹ and that a man's value with Allah is inextricably linked to how he treats his wife behind closed doors¹² and to how selflessly he protects his family from peril.¹³

Sadly, many women's rights discussions in modern times echo the same archaic materialistic mindset that Islam came to cure. In this worldview, chasing after a financially profitable career is the only worthy ambition, while choices such as specializing in motherhood or homemaking are devalued. Hence we find that a life dedicated to motherhood and its heroics is now perceived by many as an utter waste because it does not lead to economic growth. This constant burdening and simultaneous devaluing of women are described by the Mayo Clinic in a recent

¹⁰ Ryan Browne, "Female Marine Drops Out of Infantry Course," *CNN News*, August 16, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/15/politics/female-marine-infantry-course/>.

¹¹ Anas ibn Malik (rA) narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Whoever cares for two young girls until they come of age, he and I will be in Paradise like this," and he gestured by bringing two fingers together. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2631 and elsewhere.

¹² 'Ā'ishah (rA) narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, "The best of you [in the sight of God] are those best to their family (wives), and I am the best to my family." *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3895; authenticated by al-Albānī.

¹³ This passage was adapted from a social media comment that I found intriguing, so I hastily saved it without ascertaining its author to give him due credit here. I ask Allah that its author be pleased to find this passage in his scale of good deeds.

article entitled “Depression in Women: Understanding the Gender Gap.” The article states that “about twice as many women as men experience depression. Several factors may increase a woman’s risk of depression... often women work outside the home and still handle home responsibilities. Many women deal with the challenges of single parenthood, such as working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Also, women may be caring for their children while also caring for sick or older family members.”¹⁴ The article also suggests that hormonal changes at various phases of a woman’s life (pregnancy, post-natal, menopause, etc.), coupled with such stressors, may contribute to the higher incidence of depression in women than in men.

Certainly, a woman’s value is not bound to conception and motherhood. Many pious women bore no children, including our mother ‘Ā’ishah (Allah be pleased with her) on whose lap our beloved Prophet ﷺ breathed his last breath and to whose massive intellectual contributions all Muslims remain indebted. It is also not reduced to her ability to solicit the best suitors for marriage, lest we slight some of history’s most pious women who never married, or those who had corrupt husbands, like Āsiyah (Allah be pleased with her), the wife of Pharaoh. But, similarly, making one’s ultimate purpose any materialistic achievement is something that all people—men and women—were created to transcend. “And I did not create the jinn or human except to devote themselves to Me [alone]” (Qur’an 51:56).

The torrent of messages echoed by a materialistic society not only causes some women to disdain motherhood but also causes some men to feel devalued when they are ‘only’ providing for their family through whatever job they are able to obtain. Just as women find themselves dissatisfied when comparing themselves to men in terms of work outside the home and earning power, many men are exasperated when pitted against each other in the rat-race for higher-paying jobs and more glamorous positions. This predicament illustrates another liberating facet of Islam: material wealth should never be accepted as a determining factor of value in an equitable society. All humans are valuable and honored by virtue of their

¹⁴ Mayo Clinic, “Depression in Women: Understanding the Gender Gap,” Mayo Clinic, January 29, 2019, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression/art-20047725>.

humanity, then further distinguished in light of their devotion to God and how each of them fulfills their unique God-given potential.

The fatherlessness experiment

Unfolding before us today is a terrifying fatherlessness experiment in which some view fathers as mere biological contributors who abandon their children or are, at best, uninvolved financiers. According to a Pew study on [The American Family Today](#), the two-parent household is facing a rapid decline in the United States and children born out of wedlock now account for 1/3 of all births since the year 2000. This radical shift from the traditional family model is [no harmless rearrangement](#): fatherless children are at a dramatically greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, suicide, poor educational performance, teen pregnancy, and criminality. A staggering 80% of adolescents in psychiatric institutes stem from fatherless homes¹⁵ and children are twice as likely to be sexually abused (especially girls) in a home devoid of the biological father.¹⁶ In terms of youth violence, “the percentage of single-parent households with children between the ages of 12 and 20 is significantly associated with rates of violent crime and burglary.”¹⁷ According to a US Department of Justice Special Report published in 1988, 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions had absent fathers.¹⁸ Research conducted at Harvard University captures how some of these developmental crises are partially mitigated—but not entirely—in African-American families because other male figures from the extended family will often remain involved, especially when the father figure is removed from the picture for various reasons. This happens less often in Caucasian families and is associated with worse outcomes for those

¹⁵ Jack Block, Jeanne H. Block, and Per F. Gjerde, “Parental Functioning and the Home Environment in Families of Divorce,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 27, no. 2 (1988): 207–13.

¹⁶ Beverly Gomes-Schwartz, Jonathan Horowitz, and Albert P. Cardarelli, *Child Sexual Abuse Victims and Their Treatment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1988).

¹⁷ Bryan J. Grapes, ed., *Violent Children* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2000), http://www.demes.teimes.gr/spoudastirio/E-NOTES/V/Violent_Children_Viewpoints.pdf.

¹⁸ Steve Blake, memo to the members of the Legislative Study Committee on Child Placement and Support, September 24, 2018, https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2018/1785/020_september_25_2018_meeting_10_00_a_m_room_41_2_east_state_capitol/sept25blake_dadsofwi.

fatherless children.¹⁹ However, according to Jennifer Schwartz’s doctoral thesis, even the presence of a multigenerational household, or higher male capital (a greater number of males) in the community, still did not fully attenuate the effects of fatherlessness. “Deleterious effects of father absence on violence persist for females and males, even after controlling for indicators of structural disadvantage and community social control mechanisms. Though male capital and collective caregiving can make up for some of the community deficits associated with widespread father absence, father absence continues to exert significant, destructive effects on gender-disaggregated violence rates.”²⁰ It was similarly reported in *The European Journal of Population* in 2017 that the presence of grandparents in a multigenerational home did not fully mitigate the negative relation between fatherlessness and academic performance, especially in mathematics.²¹

While these statistics may very well stem from married but absent (in some way) fathers, divorced or never married fathers, or other types of extramarital relations, we must not underestimate the harmful effects of diminishing fathers’ roles in society. The current fatherlessness epidemic also reminds Muslims of what they should already know, because our Creator often calls our attention to the dynamic interplay between opposites in His universe: “By the night as it covers, and by the day as it brightens, and by the creation of the male and the female; your strivings are immensely diverse” (Qur’an 92:1-4). The complementary existence of night and day, male and female, even good and evil, are all necessary components of balance in the universe. Extending this to parenting, *just as fathers can never fully offer their children what mothers can, mothers can never fully offer their children what fathers can.*

¹⁹ Christine Cross, “The Myth of the Two-Parent Home,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/opinion/two-parent-family.html?fbclid=IwAR3aWlfH-VOJ_RpT2a4k3CLKzBvbaXOXkujkVr5pltXmQgImGlaZ9eazQJs#click=https://t.co/oPJQGTcrsB.

²⁰ Jennifer Schwartz, “The Effect of Father Absence and Father Alternatives on Female and Male Rates of Violence” (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, August 2003), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/206316.pdf>.

²¹ Jonas Radl, Leire Salazar, and Héctor Cebolla-Boado, “Does Living in a Fatherless Household Compromise Educational Success? A Comparative Study of Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills,” *European Journal of Population* 33, no. 2 (May 2017): 217–42, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5400797/>.

The necessity of divine revelation

Such basic truths may be challenged today by modern secular thought, where the “open mind” and “objective human intellect” are accepted by many as the ultimate authorities. Embracing human intellect is not wrong, so long as its limitations and biases are recognized.²² Consider the gender debate, for instance; non-bias is near impossible since the disputing parties themselves are the judges. Is it a coincidence that women rarely scream injustice when hearing the “kindness to your mother thrice” hadith? Is it a coincidence that men rarely scream injustice when hearing the “husband’s leadership” verses? When a negative reaction to these texts arises, it is usually from the opposite corner, whose bias generates a misperception of injustice in that flawless sacred text. Even among those who nobly try to escape their biases, some stumble into the opposite bias. Excessive focus on one’s inherent bias can lead to the opposite extreme. Consider how in some women’s attempts to escape their default pro-woman bias, they are dismissive of some very legitimate feminist grievances. Or in some men’s attempts to escape their gender bias, they charge with toxicity at some noble masculine ideals. As the famous adage reads, “When the axe fell in the forest, the trees cried out, ‘But the handle is one of us!’” In truth, only God can assess fairly, with full wisdom and neutrality, for only God transcends bias and the blindspots of human intellect. “Transcendent is He who created all the pairs; of what the earth sprouts, and of your own selves, and of things you do not know” (Qur’an 36:42).

Cultural conditioning also biases us. Our sensibilities and evaluative criteria were not developed in a vacuum. Take our contemporary perception of fatherhood, for instance; it was not constructed independently of the [foolish sitcom dads](#) we grew up watching. Homer Simpson is a certified buffoon. The father figure in *Family Guy* is a lowlife. In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the father evades all duties to play golf. In *Stranger Things*, the Wheelers’ dad is oblivious to those who live under his roof. In the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, Will’s father returns only to traumatize his son

²² See Omar Edward Moad, “Honored Since Adam: Islam and the Value of Human Freedom,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, October 23, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/omar-edward-moad/honored-since-adam-islam-and-the-value-of-human-freedom/#.XegVqXt7nb0>.

one last time. This narrative has even crafted men's perception of themselves, for art and literature have always been prescriptive of a culture and not just descriptive of it. Some men have internalized this narrative, becoming runaway and video-game dads. Many others have decided that they would rather shun fatherhood than be poor at it.

Supplemented by the venom of endless hookup apps in the smartphone era, we now face the devastating effects of normalized fornication detailed by Mark Regnerus in his book, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*. There has been a historical U-shaped curve as far as the severity of the media's portrayal of the father as being ignorant or doltish between the 1940s and now.²³ We seem to be at the top of that curve at present and though the deleterious effects of these shifting norms on the family won't be fully grasped for another generation, the downward spiral of social disintegration clearly continues unabated. We already see how sexual freedoms have spawned loneliness and lack of care for the elderly, increased predation, decreased social accountability and, most importantly, have resulted in a lack of concern for God's perspective.

Only by submitting to God's wisdom and authority (Islam) can we escape this chaos. "Does He not know what He created, and He is *al-Laṭīf* (the Most Subtle), *al-Khabīr* (the Best Acquainted)?" (Sūrat al-Mulk: 14). It is only the guidance of Allah that can prevent the role confusion and identity dysphoria that begets family crisis and social chaos. Also, the finite nature of this world and particularly that of modern consumerist discourse lends itself to greed²⁴ and a dog-eat-dog mentality, which is why only through reorienting our pursuits towards God's infinite mercy can there be plenty for every seeker. Only then can human beings escape the crippling power struggles between the rich and poor, strong and weak, man and woman.

²³ Ralph LaRossa, Charles Jaret, Malati Gadgil, and G. Robert Wynn, "The Changing Culture of Fatherhood in Comic-Strip Families: A Six-Decade Analysis," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, no. 2 (May 2000): 375–87, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00375.x>.

²⁴ See Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, "Crisis of Modern Consciousness," lecture at Masjid Negara, Kuala Lumpur, March 28, 2010, <https://youtu.be/RWOKaOb33K4>.

In summary, the primary roles of men and women in family are distinct, and so it should not be about who can outdo the other in the same task, but who can fulfill their God-ordained duties in a superior way. Given the distinctive characteristics and features of men and women, men are tasked with being the primary earners and leaders²⁵ while women are tasked with being the primary nurturers and educators. These are major and significant exceptions, due to individual qualities or greater need, as we cite in this paper, even at the time of the Prophet ﷺ, however these are the wisest arrangements for this world set by the Most Just, Most Merciful, Most Wise Creator. From Allah's wisdom and mercy is that He created men and women with *interdependent* natures, through which they find relevance in each other, a relevance that can actualize balance and tranquility in their relationship, for their children, and in society at large. And to ensure this equilibrium, Allah's justice equitably delineates for each partner their rights and responsibilities. As Dr. Hatem al-Haj writes,

Once you disturb the delicate balance between rights and responsibilities, you will not be able to predict the results, let alone control them. I hope our young preachers realize this while they are rightfully trying to make Islam more appealing to the dominant modern culture. For example, when you void the *qiwamah* (the husband's position as the head of the household) from its meaning and make it only about responsibilities without the corresponding rights, you will sound 'moderate' and culturally competent. However, you will be disturbing the fine balance established by the All-Knowing and All-Wise. The whole community will suffer, but our sisters will be the ones to suffer the most.²⁶

What do fathers offer?

An ideal parenting model requires that each parent have a primary role, even if they may inevitably wear other hats on specific occasions. Building on that premise, we turn now to exploring the benefits children receive from their

²⁵ Qur'an 4:34 and 65:6.

²⁶ Hatem al-Haj, "Once you disturb the delicate balance between rights and responsibilities, you will not be able to predict the results, let alone control them," Facebook, January 4, 2017.

relationship with their father that are notably different from those derived from their relationship with their mother.

I - Paternal Authority

A father being present, cooperative, collaborative and involved in family life infuses the home with an aura of order and discipline. Fathers play an instrumental role in preventing the misconduct and sometimes even the psychopathology of their children. This is according to Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (d. 1980 and 1972, respectively) who were astute criminologists who studied juvenile delinquency. They developed “social prediction tables” that predicted the likelihood of delinquent behavior in youth and described the developmental need of children to experience both appropriate discipline and loving nurturance. This is of course not to suggest that fathers are always the best disciplinarians, or that fathers may never serve as the primary caretaker. Ideally, both mother and father will collaborate to provide the appropriate mix of discipline and nurturance.

Since our children are a reflection of us, what helps ensure that they benefit from paternal authority is seeing their mother respect their father’s leadership in the family. Otherwise, children will begin to use one parent to undermine the other, and then the father may eventually gravitate away from family involvement due to alienation or simply to avoid conflict. While some men become uninvolved with the family because they are irresponsible or unskilled in effective communication and conflict resolution, [maternal gatekeeping](#) is also another factor. Unless this is also taken into account, paternal authority is lost with his withdrawal, and that could set the stage for a lifetime of suffering for his children.

Cynthia Harper and Sara McLanahan conducted a two-decade-long longitudinal study of 6,403 fatherless boys who were aged between 14 and 22 in 1979. They found that fatherlessness led to a predictable and significantly higher chance of incarceration later in life.²⁷ Indeed, boys growing up in single-mother households

²⁷ Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, “Father Absence and Youth Incarceration,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 14, no. 3 (September 2004): 369–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2004.00079.x>.

were twice as likely as boys in mother-father households to be incarcerated in young adulthood. This was true for all families, regardless of race.

Since Islam's paradigm of "male leadership in the household" is often misunderstood, let us attempt to clarify this concept here:

- ❖ A multitude of texts in the Qur'an and Sunnah establish beyond question that it is Allah who designated this, not "patriarchal traditionalists" nor smug revisionists. Since Allah transcends gender and fallibility, we would do ourselves a service to explore the wisdom of such a designation. Perhaps the wisdom lies in men having a greater capacity for leadership, or women having a greater capacity for nurturance; perhaps both and more. Ultimately, *taslīm* (surrender) is the essence of Islam. While this does not require the suspension of the intellect, it does mean that if a person only accepts what "makes sense" to them, then their god is not God The Creator. As Allah says, "Have you seen the one who takes his own *hawá* (whims/biases) as his god? Would you then be an agent for [defending] him?" (Qur'an 25:43).
- ❖ Authority here is not authoritarianism. It is incontrovertible that the stereotypical caricature of wives as powerless sex-slaves not entitled to an opinion has no basis in Islam (abuse of authority is addressed later in this paper). Allah frames marriage in the Qur'an as a union of tranquility, mercy, affection (30:21), and mutual respect (2:148). Traditional Muslim jurists have explained how even children are accorded considerable degrees of autonomy, and spouses have even more freedom to express their individuality. Muslim jurists have further upheld for fourteen centuries that a wife's duty towards her husband is contingent upon his fulfilling his own duties towards her (in light of 2:228) and hence she can have him penalized, or the marriage annulled, if he fails to maintain them. In Islam, absolute authority belongs only to God but, for the sake of social order, God allotted some a degree of authority over others and demands compliance for the collective good. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Every one of you is a shepherd and is questioned about his flock. The leader of people is a guardian and is questioned about his subjects. A man is the guardian of his family and is

questioned about them. A woman is the guardian of her husband's home and his children and she is questioned about them."²⁸ Shepherding requires responsibility and leadership, for it would be inequity to hold anyone liable for anything over which they have no control.

- ❖ Marriage is much like any other joint enterprise; it requires an effective means for preventing endless debate and decision paralysis. In the Sunnah, we find that "if three people set out on a journey, they should appoint one of them as the leader,"²⁹ so how much more necessary would a leadership mechanism be for preventing such problems in the lifelong marital journey? Imagine a presidential debate not ending with the people's ultimate decision, but rather when one party concedes to the other. Hence, the Prophet ﷺ who taught men by his example to seek counsel from their wives,³⁰ also taught us that Allah has authorized the husband to make the final decision, and accordingly be more answerable to Allah because of it. Just as being the leader among travelers does not entail any lesser virtue of the rest, being the tiebreaker as the husband does not entail insult to the wife. Finally, an entire genre of prophetic hadith(s) emphasizes fleeing from leadership³¹ and establishes that those coveting it are unqualified for it.³² When leadership is imposed on anyone, men in this case, they should be fearful of not fulfilling it, certain that their interrogation will be unlike everyone else's and sincere in pleasing Allah and then his family. "That home of the hereafter We grant to those who do not seek exaltedness upon the earth nor corruption" (Qur'an 28:32).

²⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6719; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1829.

²⁹ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 8:960.

³⁰ It is widely established in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and elsewhere that when the Prophet ﷺ finalized a peace treaty with Quraysh, he ordered his companions to discontinue their *'umrah*. When they did not, he entered upon his wife, Umm Salamah (rA), and complained of their reluctance. She said, "O Prophet of Allah, do you want them to do that? Exit and do not speak to any of them until you have sacrificed your camel and summoned the barber to shave your head." When he did that, they realized that the matter was irreversible, and so all 1,400 of them followed suit. See *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos. 2731, 2732.

³¹ Abū Hurayrah (rA) narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, "You will certainly be keen on leadership, but it will be a source of great regret on the Day of Resurrection." *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6729.

³² Abū Musā al-Ash'arī (rA) narrated: "I entered upon the Prophet ﷺ with two of my cousins. One of them said, 'Appoint us to a position of leadership, O Messenger of Allah,' and the other said the same. The Prophet ﷺ responded, 'We do not appoint this work to anyone who asks for it or is eager for it.'" *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 463; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1733.

While abuse of authority is a pervasive reality in our world, Islam teaches us that it is not the presence of authority (without which there is chaos) that is problematic. Rather, what is problematic is the absence of the greatest safeguards against human transgression; i.e., the fear of God, the cultivation of conscience, the sincerity of wanting to do the right thing, and the identification of God's boundaries which must be honored and protected in the public and private domain. These are rare in an age when Islam is a mere cultural identity for many, and thus our mothers, sisters, and daughters are oppressed in many Muslim homes before our very eyes. But whenever and wherever Islam is embraced authentically, we find shining examples that embody the Prophet's صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم words, "The best of you are those [who are] best to their wives."³³

Ultimately, if a child does not experience a clear power structure at home to which he must conform, he will struggle to respect rules, and sometimes to even recognize God's authority in his life. Developing a sense of accountability and self-restraint are necessary for children to avoid unwanted consequences. Seventy percent of adolescents in US juvenile correctional facilities come from fatherless homes and nine times as many high school dropouts stem from fatherless homes (see: [infographic](#)). These were children who did not have someone to instill in them frustration tolerance and accustom them to hearing a non-negotiable "no" at times. This is a priceless developmental contribution, a cornerstone of emotional regulation and resilience, and often it is the father figure who provides this.

II - Paternal Affection

Expressions of warmth and endearment from the father enhance his capacity to fulfill his primary role; they offer a constant non-verbal reassurance that dad is not disciplining children out of hatred but rather from genuine concern. Paternal affection also has [intrinsic benefit](#) for a child, since children crave different kinds of loving care, both paternal and maternal. Alfred Messer describes how "father hunger" often afflicts boys aged one and two whose fathers are suddenly and permanently absent. Sleep disturbances, such as trouble falling asleep, nightmares,

³³ See footnote 13.

and night terrors frequently begin within one to three months after the father's disappearance from the home.³⁴

Absentee fathers create an emotional void that also leaves youth particularly susceptible to myopic decision-making. For instance, two-thirds of teen pregnancies happen among girls from fatherless homes;³⁵ many of these girls sought masculine protective love, while the men who fathered the babies had entirely other motives. Similarly, 90% of homeless and runaway children come from fatherless homes.³⁶ For many young men, their transition into adulthood is obstructed by the absence of a model of manliness in the home. This is often associated with feelings of alienation that generate a sense of inadequacy which spawns a lifetime of estrangement and rebellion, as captured by the likes of Randy Hix in his book, *The Affirmation Crisis: Healing the Wounds of a Fatherless Generation*. But these are not the only victims; others who felt unaccepted by their present fathers suffer a heightened propensity for attempting to compensate by turning to gangs and obsessive video-gaming, seeking through them the acceptance that they were missing and which they needed and craved. In a paper on street gangs published by the *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, researcher Stanley Taylor writes, "Only 1 out of the 8 members in this study had a father that lived at home. Given that the participants were from completely different gangs from varying areas of Los Angeles, it showed a surprising consistency in the members' lack of fathers' participation in their lives as children."³⁷ The author goes on to establish that the participants almost all said that they found greater acceptance in the gang and were complimented more than they ever were at home.

³⁴ Alfred Messer, "Boys' Father Hunger: The Missing Father Syndrome," *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality* 23 (January 1989): 44–47.

³⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, press release, March 26, 1999.

³⁶ Edward Kruk, "Father Absence, Father Deficit, Father Hunger," *Psychology Today*, May 23, 2012, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/co-parenting-after-divorce/201205/father-absence-father-deficit-father-hunger>; Normer Adams, "Why Dads Matter," Juvenile Justice Information Exchange, Kennesaw State University, June 20, 2010, <https://jjie.org/2010/06/20/why-dads-matter/>.

³⁷ Stanley S. Taylor, "Why American Boys Join Street Gangs," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 5, no. 8 (December 2013): 339–49, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.429.2209&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

III - Financial Security

In 2011, the US Census Bureau reported that “12 percent of children in married-couple families were living in poverty, compared to 44 percent of children in mother-only families.”³⁸ One may ask whether or not the remaining 54% who escaped poverty were unscathed. Far from it; a sizable portion of financially secure fatherless homes still suffer from emotional hunger. After realizing just how consequential paternal affection is, one can imagine the dire necessity of a mother’s unparalleled mercy. For too many children, securing the finances happens at the expense of the mother’s physical presence in the home. This emotional starvation may be reflected in the fact that 69% of suicide deaths occur in fatherless families.

Muslim judges from every school of Islamic law have historically recognized that mothers were afforded a greater capacity for child-rearing and nurturance. Jurists unanimously agree that “the mother is most entitled to the physical custody of the youngster”³⁹ in the case of divorce because the Prophet ﷺ established this verdict himself.⁴⁰ The wisdom behind this should be evident. As some psychologists frame it, women’s personalities are consistently more agreeable (think: willing to sacrifice for the child)⁴¹ while men are generally more conscientious (think: task-oriented). Hence, perceiving the mother’s and father’s roles as being interchangeable is a reckless notion that should not go unchallenged. As for when life-circumstances force either parent to assume a dual role, this is when it would be warranted to remember exceptional orphans in world history,

³⁸ *Children’s Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2011* (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2011), Table C8.

³⁹ Salah al-Sawy, “Family Code for Muslim Communities in North America,” presented at The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America’s 8th Annual Conference, Kuwait, March 2012, <https://www.amjaonline.org/declaration-articles/the-assemblys-family-code-for-muslim-communities-in-north-america/>.

⁴⁰ ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr (rA) narrates that a woman said, “O Messenger of Allah, my womb was a vessel for this son of mine, my breasts were a water-skin for him, and my lap was a guard for him. Now his father has divorced me, and wants to take him away from me.” The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “You have more right to him, as long as you do not marry.” *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 2269; authenticated by al-Albānī in *Irwā’ al-Ghalīl*, no. 2187.

⁴¹ Alan Feingold, “Gender Differences in Personality: A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116, no. 3 (November 1994): 429–56.

some of whom were prophets of Allah, and how Allah may sometimes intervene to compensate, and that only God is truly irreplaceable.

Where men must man up

I - Reviving prophetic leadership

Men must own the task of controlling their own egos. Allah entrusted men with leadership for the betterment of the family, not for selfish interests. Even if hearts may be in the right place, people rebel when they don't have breathing room and are constrained. We must remember that the same man ﷺ who told us that men are heads of their families showed us that being the head means to serve, protect, and be a source of support—duties and obligations for which a man will be questioned by God. ‘Ā’ishah (Allah be pleased with her) described him ﷺ as being someone who mended his own clothes, milked his own sheep, and served himself.⁴² In *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, under the heading *How a Man Should Be With His Family*, we find ‘Ā’ishah attesting that he ﷺ would be found “in the service of his family” at home.⁴³ He ﷺ would outperform everyone in forgiving any infringement on his rights and outdo everyone in restraining his anger. Upon being informed that no food was available in the house, he ﷺ would simply say, “Then I am fasting.”⁴⁴

Those mentored by the Prophet ﷺ also left shining examples of how true leaders pave, with their exemplary character, a pathway into people’s hearts. The strictness of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (Allah be pleased with him) was known to all, yet people seemed to have been persuaded more by his righteousness than his rigidity. They felt that standing before them was someone truly genuine, a person who was tougher on himself than he was on them. Embedded in his example is the formula for every man who seeks the cooperation of his family. We sometimes unwittingly encourage rebellion in our homes through our own blatant non-conformity with Allah’s authority. When a husband is notorious in his household for missing

⁴² *Musnad Ahmad*, nos. 24903, 26194; authenticated by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘*, no. 4937.

⁴³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6039.

⁴⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1154.

prayers, uttering profanity, watching inappropriate shows, or behaving violently, it diminishes his chances of being taken seriously when he instructs his family or selectively enjoins a Qur’anic verse or prophetic hadith. Leaders lead by example.

Another unfortunate phenomenon in this regard is when the *wali* (male guardian) obstructs the marriage of his daughters to compatible suitors. The Qur’an expressly forbids⁴⁵ such men from exploiting their authority to drive away decent and honorable men from asking for the hand of women under their care (usually their daughters). This obstinance is contrary to the actual role of a *walī*, which is to facilitate marriage to compatible suitors, not impede it. Shaykh al-‘Uthaymīn, a senior Saudi jurist, said, “And the jurists—Allah bestow mercy on them—mentioned that when a *walī* repeatedly rejects a compatible suitor, that makes him a *fāsiq* (flagrant sinner), and his credibility (in testimony) and guardianship are dismissed. In fact, he becomes disqualified as an *imām* according to the well-known position of the Ḥanbalī school, whereby he cannot lead the Muslims as their *imām* in a congregational prayer, and that is a grave matter.”⁴⁶

II - Restoring male affection

Though Allah made receiving His mercy contingent upon extending mercy to all,⁴⁷ this was especially emphasized in the case of youngsters for obvious reasons. Withholding expressions of love and affection from children, or leaving this to the mother alone, can be devastating. When al-Aqra‘ b. Ḥābis (Allah be pleased with him) witnessed the Prophet ﷺ kissing his grandson, he boasted of never kissing any of his ten sons, to which the Prophet ﷺ said, “What can I possibly offer you if Allah has plucked mercy from your heart? Whoever does not show mercy will not receive mercy.”⁴⁸ In the United States alone, twenty million kids have no physical father present to bolster them and wipe away their tears, and millions more have a physically present father yet find him emotionally insensitive or

⁴⁵ Qur’an 2:232 and 4:19.

⁴⁶ Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Musnad, *Fatāwā Islāmīyah* (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1995), 3:148.

⁴⁷ Anas (rA) narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, “I swear by the One in whose hand is my soul, Allah does not send down His mercy except upon the merciful.” They said, “O Messenger of Allah, we all exhibit mercy.” He ﷺ said, “This is not the mercy a person extends to his companion. Rather, it is extending mercy to people at large.” *Musnad Abī Ya‘la‘a*, no. 4258, graded *ḥasan* by al-Albānī in *al-Silsilah al-Ṣaḥīḥah*, no. 167.

⁴⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5998, 5651; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2318.

absent. Even in Muslim communities, we sometimes find bizarre notions of aloof masculinity that are in stark contradistinction to the prophetic ideal. These are usually due to cultural notions that preclude boys from being hugged or require them to suppress their emotions. But when consulting the prophetic model, we find in the Sunnah that the manliest man of all time taught men to soften their hearts by caressing an orphan's head⁴⁹ and that he would playfully carry Usāmah and al-Ḥasan (Allah be pleased with them) and say, "O Allah, I love these two, so love these two."⁵⁰ Thus was the Prophet ﷺ; a marvelous mixture of gentleness at home and fearlessness on the battlefield. In fact, Sa'd b. 'Ubādah (Allah be pleased with him) once struggled to understand how the Prophet ﷺ, who taught them to accept God's fate, had tears streaming down his face as he watched his infant grandson dying. Turning even this moment into a teachable one, the Prophet ﷺ said, "These [tears] are a mercy that Allah places in the hearts of whomever He wishes, and whoever does not exhibit mercy will not experience mercy."⁵¹

Fathers sometimes employ cruelty with their sons thinking it is necessary to "toughen them up." Islam does encourage boys to develop physical strength and overall toughness and does not teach that male courage and protective proclivities are mere social constructs. However, its balanced roadmap to these virtues is what ensures they are actualized but kept from becoming toxic masculinity. Stressing paternal affection is a component of that divine balance. Excessive roughness can actually lead to the same lack of resilience and tenacity they fear for their sons, for it inculcates a lack of self-respect and conditions them to succumb to meekness, bullying, and humiliation. This is even more likely during childhood when the malleability of personality is at its prime.

Another negative outcome of callous treatment is that when children are stripped of their inborn empathy, this can turn them into transgressing menaces. Albert Bandura, Stanford University author of *Adolescent Aggression*, observed that delinquents usually suffer from an absence of paternal affection.

⁴⁹ *Musnad Ahmad*, 2:263; see *al-Silsilah asl-Ṣaḥīḥa*, no. 854 and *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, no. 1410 for its authenticity.

⁵⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3747 and elsewhere.

⁵¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1284; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 923.

III - The sacred financial duty

Given that no one wants to have to choose between fulfilling the emotional versus financial needs of their children, we must assume that some women have had to assume the role of the primary breadwinner after their husbands neglected this duty. A myriad of reasons may play a role in men's financial abandonment of their families, of which we will tackle two:

- ❖ Many men stipulate appreciation in return for service, by corollary, ingratitude leads to the cessation of that service. Certainly, the Prophet ﷺ severely cautioned women against being ungrateful to their husbands, but from the perspective of male duties, this is where the consistency of sincerely working for Allah's pleasure manifests. Men should not be providing for their families because the family is thankful, rather because we are bankrupt and in need of Allah's pleasure. We should remember that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Out of the dinar (gold-currency) that you spend in Allah's path, that with which you free a slave, that which you donate to the needy, and that which you spend on your family, the one yielding the greatest reward is that which you spend on your family."⁵² One may wonder why spending on our own family is such a highly rewarded act in Islam. For the stability of the home, Allah is telling the providers that *I know your work behind closed doors may not be appreciated, but do not let up; I appreciate you.*
- ❖ Some men simply exploit their wives, emotionally guiltig them for "staying home all day" and "not helping the family with anything." Such men have bought into the materialistic hype which sees only money as valuable and its accumulation as being admirable. They were duped into perceiving housewives and stay-at-home mothers as lazy people who live for gossip and soap operas. No dignified Muslim should tolerate such sweeping stereotypes, let alone utter them, especially after his wife has undertaken the *jihad* (struggle) of

⁵² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 995.

motherhood. “Working mother” certainly is a redundant statement. The mother is the child’s first teacher, who educates through her seemingly mundane yet profound daily interactions with the child, and through the earliest conversations with that child, when they are discovering, under mom’s wings, what it really means to be human. Expecting mothers to earn wages outside as the norm while caring for the children is unfair to them and to the children, just as asking fathers to stay home as the norm being the primary caretaker, warming up stockpiles of breastmilk is unfair to them and to the children. Once again we mention that exceptions, during times of need, are excluded here. One must not imagine that the biological and economic responsibilities of women and men can ever be fully interchangeable. We should not demand that women be required to go out and work, just like it would be silly to demand that men bear the children. Again, this is not arguing that a mother should never contribute outside the home, but rather that men should never expect her to, just as she should not *choose* to at the expense of her children.

A parting word

The incontrovertible rights and truths which were specifically accorded to women with the advent of Islam were elucidated in another Yaqeen publication, “*We Used to Have No Regard for Women: Gender Equity & the Advent of Islam*,”⁵³ to make evident that the Islamic civilization came upon this guidance more than one thousand years before western civilizations did. For example, it was only during World War II that women in the United States were able to enter the workforce, whereas the second ruler after the Prophet ﷺ appointed two women to manage and organize the marketplace during the 7th century. Muslim women at that time were also known to publically correct the same ruler and head of state, where he accepted that correction. Women’s opinions were actively sought out, along with

⁵³ Maryam Al-Dabbagh, “We Used to Have No Regard for Women: Gender Equity and the Advent of Islam,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, July 17, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/maryam-al-dabbagh/we-used-to-have-no-regard-for-women-gender-equity-the-advent-of-islam/#ftnt2>.

those of men, when choosing the successor to the head of state, over a millennium before they were constitutionally given the right to vote in the US, without having to fight for this basic “inalienable” right. Baffling! Such is the position and respect given to women by Islam, regarding which none of the Muslim female Companions of the Prophet ﷺ were ever known to have complained about Islam, the revelation or the way in which the Prophet ﷺ implemented it. The opposite is in fact true: they felt supported and liberated by it more than they would have imagined for their own selves.

Once these compelling principles, gender uniqueness but equity, are acknowledged, the discussion can then open up to the most basic unit of a society, the family. The importance of the two-parent household, giving to each his or her due rights and responsibilities, cannot be overstated. Two fully-functional parents will likely struggle in order to equip their children to be able to weather the looming storms they will face in their lives. A Muslim believes that only with God’s aid are these odds surmountable and appeals to God first by appreciating and embracing the definitive guidance with which He graced us. A Muslim recognizes that even greater than the threat of poverty, drugs, homelessness, and suicide is the threat of losing one’s faith. This is not just because [authoritative studies reveal that a religious upbringing is better for children’s health and well-being](#), but because providing for them in this world is secondary to providing them with safety and wellbeing in the next life, which is greater and more lasting. “Allah extends provisions for whom He will and restricts [them]. And they are deluded by the worldly life, while the worldly life is naught—compared to the hereafter—except a [brief] enjoyment” (Qur’an 13:26).

A Muslim is therefore certain that Allah does not disappoint, and that the Qur’an is His confirmed rope which He extends to save whoever grabs on to it. A Muslim trusts that guidance is best found by looking upward to the heavens, and absolutely not by looking around to those experimenting in the darkness.