For Muslim victims of sexual and domestic violence, the Qur'an can be a barrier to freedom...

“Men are in charge of women ... those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance – [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them” (4:43). Abusers often cite this verse to justify their patterns of domestic violence. A literal interpretation of this verse may lead some to believe that beating one’s wife is a legitimate means to “save a marriage.” However, it is important to understand this verse in its full context. Paired with the sunnah – or teachings of the Prophet Muhammad – it becomes clear that the intended message of this verse does not mean to physically abuse. Several scholars agree that “beating” should not cause physical (or mental) damage; and some scholars suggest that within the context of the verse, the literal translation is not “to beat” but rather, “to separate” as a final resort.

“No soul shall have a burden laid on it greater than it can bear” (2:233). This verse can troublingly be used as a means to justify the actions of an abuser and to trivialize the position of the abused. While it is true that Muslims often times interpret their hardships as a test from God, there is more depth to this verse. There is a general concept that hardship is a test to see whether one remains righteous, steadfast, and on the path of Islam (consider the story of Job or Ayyub). However, though those subject to domestic violence may remain true to their faith, abuse may not stop. This is not an error on part of the victim, but a crime on part of the abuser.

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more than the other; and because of the sustenance they provide from their own means ...” (4:34). While it is true that the Qur’an delineates certain gender roles, nowhere does it say these roles are mutually exclusive. In a power and control context, economic abuse is an equally traumatizing and suffocating form of domestic violence. While the husband is recognized as the primary breadwinner within the Qur’an, it also stresses that husbands cannot withhold what rightfully belongs to their wife and children, nor – in cases of divorce – can they “take away part of the dowry [they] have given them” (4:19).

“The retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation – their reward is [due] from Allah. Indeed, He does not like wrongdoers” (42:40). The Prophet and the Qur’an teach us that while the age-old adage of an “eye-for-an-eye” is valid, one should instead forgive and pray for one’s enemies. However, this should not be taken to mean that Muslims can be subject to abuse and domestic violence. Ultimately, abusers are subject to God’s judgment and it is clear that God condemns their behavior. Forgiveness, therefore, must be predicated on the batterer’s repentance, and repentance means changed behavior, not just saying, “I’m sorry, honey.”

...Or a resource more precious than gold.

“And among His signs is this: that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your [hearts]” (30:21). The entire concept of marriage and union between partners in Islam is predicated on the belief that this union is one defined by love and mutual respect. Two people come into marriage as equals and are expected to contribute equally to their relationship. Physical, mental, verbal, financial, and spiritual abuse undermine the “love and mercy” between partners and erode the foundations of a genuine, fulfilling marriage.

Husbands “… should either retain their wives together on equitable terms or let them go with kindness” (2:229). Islam acknowledges that not all marriages may work out, and gives guidance regarding how and in what manner to divorce (delineating property and financial rights, means to remarry, and child custody, etc.). More importantly, however, it reminds believers that separation and divorce should occur with kindness; one should not justify abuse as a legitimate means to signify the end of a relationship.

“They (your wives) are your garment and your are a garment for them” (2:187). Though the Qur’an does acknowledge that man and woman are different, it ultimately concludes that they are equal in their roles and responsibilities within marriage. Moreover, as “garments,” partners are encouraged to be intimate and close with one another – as garments are to the body – with no secrets between them, protecting one another from the “elements,” and adding to the beauty of the individual as garments do.

Violence is not encouraged in the Qur’an, and it is written that, “... whoever kills a soul unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely” (5:32). The Qur’an stresses the prevention of unjust violence perpetrated by abusers. It encourages growing in a faith that ensures the survival and wellness of those who have experienced domestic violence and are oppressed. In that capacity, Muslims can view their domestic violence awareness and prevention programs as a religious service that seeks to better the state of the world; in helping victims of domestic violence improve their situation, they are – in a way – helping to “save mankind entirely.”

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