



Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) Shura Council Statement on Domestic Violence

The WISE Shura Council is a global and inclusive council of Muslim women scholars, activists and specialists that critically engages with dominant Islamic interpretations of social issues and practices; promotes religiously grounded arguments that enable women to make dignified choices based on their own religious tradition; and disseminates authoritative opinions around the world.

The recently introduced Domestic Violence Bill in Pakistan has brought national and international attention to issues of violence against women. The phenomenon of domestic violence is not only present in Pakistan today, but it exists around the world, within different cultures and religions. It is a reality in the lives of millions of Muslims, and prevents entire societies from flourishing in religious, cultural, political and economic spheres. Domestic violence destroys the ability of Muslim women and others to thrive within their families, communities and nations. This is a clear injustice to those who suffer such indignities and a violation of the teachings of Islam.

Although interpretations of the Qur'an have been wrongly used to justify violence against women, the true message of the Qur'an and the Sunnah make it clear that violence should never be used and that Islam is a religion of peace and harmony for all individuals. For these reasons, the WISE Shura Council rejects the use of domestic violence and insists that violence against women come to an end.

"None but a noble man treats women in an honorable manner. And none but a dishonorable man treats women disgracefully"

-The Prophet Muhammad (Sunan Tirmidhi)

Violence cannot be divided into public and private spheres. Even though domestic violence may be a seemingly private offense because it first involves individuals and families, it poisons the next generation and infects the rest of society. A household is a miniature community; thus, when we encourage safe families, we cultivate safe communities. Similarly, dysfunctional families in which women are stripped of their dignity lead to dysfunctional communities.

In order to counter the belief that domestic violence is accepted in Islam, it is necessary to look at the different factors refuting this view: an analysis of the words *daraba* and *nushuz* from Sura 4 Verse 34, an inter-textual analysis of the Qur'an, the example of the Prophet and the general message of the Qur'an. Looking to the primary sources of Islam, it is clear that the Prophet's life, a model of excellence, dignity and justice, never included violent behavior towards women or toward members of his household. Rather, he treated women and children with the utmost kindness and respect. In the Sunnah, we do not have a single report of the Prophet striking his wives. Instead, we read from Anas ibn Malik, a Companion of the Prophet: "I have never seen anyone more kind to one's family than (the Prophet Muhammad)" (Sahih Muslim).

Nevertheless, some Muslims do excuse domestic violence on the basis of the Qur'an's Surah 4, verse 34. They assume that this verse specifically gives husbands the right to beat, or at least physically chastise, their wives. In most English translations, the second half of this verse is translated as follows: "As to those women on whose part you fear disloyalty (*nushuz*), first admonish them, then abandon their sleeping places, then beat them (lightly) [*udribuhuna*]." In classical Arabic, the word *daraba* has 25 different meanings. "Beat" or "chastise" are two of them, but another is "go away from." Therefore, the verse could be interpreted as: "As to those women on whose part you fear disloyalty, first admonish them, then abandon their sleeping places, then *go away from them*."

No other Qur'anic verses support the interpretation of *daraba* as "beat," though other passages do support the "go away from" meaning. In fact, the Qur'an offers an overall picture of non-coercion in marriage, even in ending it. For example, 2:231 reads: "When you divorce wives and they are about to reach their term, then hold them back honorably or set them free honorably; but do not hold them back by injuring them so that you commit aggression." In other words, husbands are urged to divorce their

wives if they desire, but to not inflict injury on them in the process of the *divorce*. Yet if the Qur'an tells husbands to beat their wives while *married*, this gives women more incentive to seek divorce. This contradiction with the Qur'an's clear preference for marriage over divorce does not arise if 4:34 is translated as "go away from."

However *daraba* is defined, the Qur'an clearly makes its application conditional upon the fear of *nushuz*. Without *nushuz*, which in many translations and interpretations is rendered "disobedience," "disharmony," or even "disloyalty," the subsequent steps outlined in the verse cannot be applied. Linguistically, the word *nushuz* means "to stand up," as from a seated or sleeping position with the intent to leave that specific location. This is how it is consistently used in other parts of the Qur'an (for example, 58:11 and 2:259). In the context of 4:34, therefore, *nushuz* must mean to get up and leave the marriage.

The broader message of the Qur'an is the promotion of harmony and affection between husband and wife, which conflicts with the permission to beat one's wife. For instance, in 30:21 we read: "And among His Signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may live in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily there are Signs in that for those who reflect." Interpreting *daraba* in 4:34 to mean "beat" would seem to contradict with this message of tranquility, love, and mercy in the home. Because it is generally acknowledged among both classical and modern scholars that the preferred method for interpreting the Qur'an is by means of other Qur'anic passages, known as "interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an" (*tafsir al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an*), these passages hold important implications for the meaning of 4:34..

In addition, the Qur'an uses three words other than *daraba* to mean "strike" or "beat," in verses 28:15, 38:41, and 51:29. Furthermore, the *d-r-b* root carries at least seventeen distinct connotations in the Qur'an, including "hold up as an example" (43:57), "travel through" (4:101), and "cover" (3:112), just to name a few. Often, this root suggests a figurative meaning: moving away, separating, distancing from, or setting up a barrier (including in the home). Within the context of marital conflict, this is the most likely meaning, as a husband separates from his wife before ending the marriage. This is consistent with the Prophet Muhammad's practice with respect to his wives.

Based on the Prophet's own actions, we can assume that he understood the word *daraba* in 4:34 to mean "go away from," not "beat." When experiencing conflict with his wives, he simply left his marital home and stayed away from them for a short period. If, on the other hand, he had interpreted 4:34 to demand physical discipline, he would have done so. This understanding is also reflected in his order, "Never beat God's handmaidens" (Sunan Abu Dawud), as well as his praise of those who treated their wives with kindness: "The most perfect of the believers in faith are the best of them in moral excellence, and the best of you are the kindest to their wives" (Sunan Tirmidhi).

Although it is un-Islamic, the idea that violence against women is acceptable has permeated through many generations and societies, Muslim or otherwise. Now is the time to change. According to the Qur'an, in order to change the world, we must first change our own attitudes, thinking and ultimately, ourselves. Only then will the world around us change. Change yourself and others will change.

'For his sake there are angels following one another, before him and behind him, who guard him by Allah's commandment; surely Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition; and when Allah intends evil to a people, there is no averting it, and besides Him they have no protector.' (Sura 11 Verse 13)

This statement is an extract from the WISE Shura Council's 'Jihad against Violence Digest'. For more information on the Shura Council and the Jihad against Violence campaign, please visit <http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/about/shuracouncil/>