

Reframing Muslim Masculinity: Islamic Principles and Evolving Family Dynamics in Muslim Societies

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Abstract

Across Muslim-majority nations, a profound yet underexamined shift is unfolding that challenges dominant narratives about gender and masculinity. In our recent international study, we engaged with men who advocate for women's rights and girls' education, exploring their motivations and the larger sociocultural forces shaping their views. What emerged was a profound evolving masculinity—one that rejects both rigid cultural patriarchal norms and Western stereotypes. This transformation is gradual, often invisible in mainstream discourse, yet deeply significant for gender justice work in the Muslim world (Duderija, Alak, & Hissong, 2020; Inhorn, 2012; Jamal, 2018). The emerging masculinities in the Muslim world reflect a broader negotiation between faith, tradition, and modernity. As men reclaim a more just and ethical understanding of their roles, they are challenging both the cultural patriarchy that restricts women and the colonial narratives that seek to define them. This is not merely an academic discussion; it is a lived reality for millions of men and women actively reshaping their communities through their role modeling and active gender justice work. The question is not whether masculinity is transforming; it already is. The real question is whether the world is ready to recognize and engage with this transformation on its own terms.

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Veiled Narratives: Colonialism, Feminism, and the Politics of Control:

Many scholars in the past have analyzed masculinity through Raewyn Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity framework, which emphasizes dominance, wealth, and physical strength in contrast to subordinated masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, this model often fails to account for the complex interplay of religion, tradition, and modernity in Muslim societies. Applying colonial or Western-centric frameworks to Muslim masculinities risks distorting realities, reinforcing harmful misrepresentations rather than understanding the organic transformation occurring within these communities (Kanji, 2018; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). The colonial project has long fixated on the body of the Muslim woman, instrumentalizing her image and narrative to justify control over colonized societies. They strategically framed the oppression of women in colonized societies as a moral justification for their imperial agendas. By depicting non-Western men as inherently oppressive, they positioned themselves as liberators, using this narrative to legitimize the dismantling of indigenous cultures. This rhetoric allowed colonialism to mask its exploitative nature under the guise of progress and humanitarian intervention, making the subjugation of colonized peoples appear not only necessary but ethically justified (Haq, 2022). In this framework, the perceived oppression of Muslim women became a convenient trope, reinforcing the dichotomy between a supposedly enlightened West and a regressive, patriarchal East. As Leila Ahmed argues:

"The idea that other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples" (Ahmed, 1992, p.151).

By portraying Muslim women as victims in need of rescue, colonial powers constructed a moral rationale for their imperialist interventions. This narrative not only served to legitimize foreign rule but

also functioned as a cultural weapon to dismantle indigenous traditions and assert Western superiority. Ahmed (1994) further critiques this dynamic, describing colonial feminism as feminism “used against other cultures in the service of colonialism” (p. 151). She highlights that it was molded into various forms, each specifically designed to align with the distinct cultural context of the group being subjected to control.

Redefining Muslim Masculinity Narratives:

Today, many academic and media portrayals of Muslim men frame them as hegemonic and reinforce Islamophobic narratives that depict them as inherently oppressive, hypermasculine, and resistant to change (Tornberg & Tornberg, 2016). These portrayals rely on essentialist assumptions that fail to recognize the diversity of masculinities within Muslim communities and overlook the ongoing internal criticism and reforms. As discussed above, Western discourses frequently construct Muslim men as the "other" and portray a homogenized group characterized by patriarchal control, aggression, and backwardness. Many times, these portrayals serve to justify political and social interventions while ignoring the lived experiences of Muslim men who actively challenge and redefine masculinity within their own cultural and religious frameworks.

While rigid masculinity and patriarchy - norms that encourage male dominance, emotional repression, and aggression - exist in all societies, their application to Muslim men has been disproportionately emphasized in policy discussions, media representations, and even academic literature. Western media tends to overrepresent Muslim men in coverage of gender-based violence and extremism, while largely ignoring similar behaviors in non-Muslim contexts (Kanji, 2018). The lack of attention to positive models of Muslim masculinity deepens the stereotype that Islam inherently promotes gender oppression, despite the existence of counter-narratives rooted in Islamic teachings.

Through my international research on Muslim Masculinities and practice initiatives such as "Men's Talks" in various places, I have observed a growing number of Muslim men engaging in discussions about emotional well-being, nurturing father and daughter relationships, and gender justice (Jamal, 2018; Jamal et. al, 2022). These conversations provide evidence of a significant shift and contradict the monolithic portrayals of Muslim men as resistant to change. For instance, many participants expressed a strong commitment to supporting their daughters' education, advocating against domestic violence, and redefining strength as an attribute that includes compassion, empathy, and vulnerability. A crucial component of this shift is the reinterpretation and re-engagement (real concept) of Islamic teachings that emphasize authentic, ethical, and healthy masculinity. Many men in my research cite the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a model of just and compassionate leadership, drawing on Hadiths that describe his deep care and compassion toward women and children, his emphasis on mutual respect in marriage, and his rejection of oppressive gender hierarchies, thereby challenging the rigid patriarchal readings of Islam that have often been used to justify gender inequality. This is also consistent with the growing number of scholars who argue that the Qur'an itself, when read in a contextual framework, advocates for equity, partnership, kindness, support, and mutual responsibility between men and women while advocating for women's empowerment and full participation in society and their homes (Afsaruddin, 2023; Al-Hibri, 1997; Ali, 2016; Hidayatullah, 2014).

Furthermore, scholarship on Muslim masculinities demonstrates that Muslim men effectively respond to a dynamic and evolved socioeconomic environment around them, and they can be drivers of internal critiques of patriarchal norms (Inhorn, 2012). This is evident in my own work with Muslim men, where we are finding that a significant transformation is underway as men actively reimagine masculinity in ways that align with both cultural and religious frameworks. This evolving conception of manhood integrates new perspectives on gender relations, self-reflection, and social responsibility

(Jamal, 2018). In countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, many men are not only rejecting oppressive gender norms and extremist misinterpretations of Islam but are also fostering progressive change within their communities. They are increasingly advocating for gender justice and collective social reform. Findings from our International Study on Muslim Masculinities indicate that these men support and finance their daughters' education, encourage their wives' professional aspirations, and mobilize community efforts to advance broader systemic transformations (Jamal, 2023).

We found that Muslim men are increasingly engaging in critical self-reflection and redefining their roles in ways that align with faith and gender justice. When framed through an authentic understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith, these discussions foster agency, allowing Muslim men to actively participate in shaping more equitable gender norms. However, Western feminist and gender studies often overlook or marginalize their contributions, treating them as exceptions rather than acknowledging them as part of a broader shift. This narrow framing not only reinforces harmful stereotypes but also impedes the development of global solidarities in gender justice movements. Recognizing and amplifying the voices of Muslim men committed to gender equity based on Islamic principles is essential for fostering a more inclusive and collaborative approach to social change in Muslim communities.

Qawwama – An Evolving Islamic Interpretation:

This shift in masculinity is not a wholesale rejection of Islamic teachings, nor is it an uncritical adoption of Western gender norms. Rather, it represents a re-engagement with Islamic ethical principles such as justice ('adl), equity, and mutual responsibility (Qawwama), which have been overshadowed by cultural distortions (Ali, 2016; Jamal, 2018; Rehman, 2022). The Qur'an itself emphasizes justice and responsibility, but misinterpretations of key verses, such as (4:34), have historically been used to justify

patriarchal control (Mubarak, 2004; Mutiullah, 2022). Many contemporary Muslim scholars and activists are now re-examining these texts through lenses of justice and gender equity, arguing for a masculinity that is compassionate, responsible, and actively engaged in supporting women's rights (Afsaruddin, 2023). The Qur'an delineates specific gender roles in various verses, including one that is frequently misunderstood by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike which assign men as *Qawwameen* [protectors and maintainers] over women: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, as God has given some of them an advantage over others, and because they spend out of their wealth" (Qur'an, 4:34). This verse has often been misused to justify injustice and gender-based oppression, with some interpretations equating *Qawwama* with male superiority, arguing that men are inherently "physically stronger and mentally more capable" than women (Cheema, 2014). Such readings diminish the role of women within society and the family, reducing them to a position of subservience.

Qawwama: A Responsibility – Not a Dominance:

Traditionally, jurists have interpreted *Qawwama* as a husband's authority over his wife and financial responsibility toward her, framed within a patriarchal social structure where men were primary providers and protectors (Rehman, 2022). This interpretation was largely shaped by the economic and social conditions of early Islamic societies, where men had greater access to financial resources and physical security was a primary concern (Duderija et al., 2020). However, as contemporary Muslim societies undergo profound shifts in economic structures, educational opportunities, and gender norms, the understanding and practice of *Qawwama* are evolving. A widely authentic and accepted interpretation, however, frames *Qawwama* as a responsibility rather than authority. Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah clarifies that *Qawwama* is a functional duty, not a status of dominance, stressing that the financial responsibility of the family is a practical aspect rather than a symbol of men's superiority. Bin

Bayyah emphasizes that the distinction between men and women in terms of their rights in Islam does not imply a denial of women's dignity; rather, both are equal in honor and worth. The Qur'an affirms this in Surah Al-Nahl (16:97): *"Whoever does good, whether male or female, while in a state of faith, We will surely grant them a good life."* Islam acknowledges inherent differences in roles based on natural dispositions and characteristics, yet this differentiation in responsibilities does not render women inferior to men. Instead, it reflects a complementary framework that upholds equity while preserving dignity and balance within society (Beka, 2024). Additional scholars strongly criticize cultural distortions that equate *Qawwama* with male control, framing *Qawwama* within the broader Islamic principles of mutual consultation (*Shura*), love, and cooperation, underscoring that men's financial provision is a duty rather than a privilege (Badawi, 2000).

Islamic scholars and gender justice advocates increasingly challenge rigid interpretations of *Qawwama*, arguing that it should not be equated with male authority over women but rather with a duty to uphold justice, mutual care, and family well-being (Duderija et al., 2020; Mutiullah, 2022; Rehman, 2022). Quranic verses related to *Qawwama*, such as Surah An-Nisa (4:34), have been widely debated, with scholars asserting that these passages must be interpreted contextually, denouncing their use as static justifications for male dominance (Abou-Bakr, 2013; Duderija et al., 2020; Mubarak, 2004; Mutiullah, 2022; Shahrour, 2015). The verse states, "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women" (*qawwamuna 'ala an-nisa*). However, scholars argue that this responsibility is conditional and linked to economic provision rather than an inherent authority. As women increasingly contribute to household finances, the traditional basis for male-exclusive leadership is being re-evaluated (Abou-Bakr, 2013; Ali, 2016; Wadud, 1999).

These shifts are not merely theoretical but are actively reshaping lived experiences. With rising female workforce participation and changing family structures, traditional applications of *Qawwama* are

being challenged. In urban centers across the Muslim world, many men no longer see themselves as sole breadwinners but as co-contributors to household well-being. Interviews from my research highlight how men's perspectives on Qawwama have evolved as their wives and daughters pursue higher education and professional careers, fostering more cooperative family dynamics. This shift reflects broader transformations in Muslim masculinities, where men increasingly view their roles as caregivers and partners rather than unilateral decision-makers.

Legal and Social Transformations:

Legal reforms in Muslim-majority nations further illustrate this evolving perspective. The state, in line with Islamic principles, holds the authority to suspend certain practices if those principles are being misused. For example, Morocco's 2004 Moudawana reforms replaced previous laws that granted men unilateral authority over women with a recognition of joint responsibility between spouses (Hanafi, 2012). These reforms redefined marriage, ensuring both husband and wife share decision-making responsibilities. One of the most significant changes was raising the legal marriage age for women from 15 to 18, reducing child marriages, and reinforcing gender equity. Additionally, these reforms require judicial approval and explicit consent from the first wife before another marriage, making the practice of polygamy far less common.

Beyond marital relations, these reforms strengthened women's rights in divorce, custody, and inheritance, aligning with an emerging interpretation of Qawwama as a duty of justice rather than patriarchal control. Women were granted greater access to divorce, including cases of domestic abuse, neglect, or financial abandonment, while courts now oversee all divorce proceedings to prevent unilateral and unjust practices.

These legal precedents align with an emerging understanding of *Qawwama* as one centered on justice, equality, and mutual decision-making rather than patriarchal control. At the grassroots level, many Muslim men engage with these evolving norms through self-reflection and religious study. Initiatives such as Musawah, a global movement for equality in Muslim family laws, and Men Engage, a network promoting gender justice, emphasize ethical masculinity rooted in compassion, responsibility, and partnership. My research confirms this trend, as many interviewees expressed a desire to uphold *Qawwama* in a manner consistent with the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) model—where leadership is characterized by service, humility, and shared decision-making.

Ultimately, *Qawwama* is undergoing a profound transformation. While some traditionalist perspectives resist these changes, the realities of contemporary Muslim men and women necessitate a re-examination of classical interpretations. By centering *Qawwama* on justice, care, and cooperation rather than dominance, Muslim men are actively redefining their roles in ways that foster gender equity and social harmony. Sheikh Ibn Ashur (2006) interprets *Qawwama* as an administrative and economic responsibility within the framework of *Maslaha* (public interest), highlighting its intent to maintain balance and stability in the family. Meanwhile, Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2015) challenges patriarchal interpretations, advocating for a contextual reading of *Qawwama* that acknowledges the evolving roles of women in contemporary society. Collectively, these interpretations refute the notion that *Qawwama* grants men superiority over women, instead emphasizing care, duty, and ethical leadership within the family unit. As gender roles continue to shift in modern contexts, contemporary Islamic scholars argue that *Qawwama* must be understood in a way that upholds justice and mutual responsibility rather than reinforcing rigid patriarchal structures. A globally known influencer Nouman Ali Khan (2015), founder of the Bayyinah Institute—an institution focused on Arabic and Qur'anic studies—explains that *Qawwama* embodies commitment, responsibility, maintenance, seriousness, and dedication. Within the

context of Surah An-Nisa (4:34), he elaborates that a Qawwam man is one who consistently upholds care, loyalty, and unwavering support for the well-being of the women in his household. Beyond this, the Qur'an also employs Qawwama in discussions of justice, reinforcing its importance as a principle of fairness and uprightness. Within the marital framework, this principle necessitates mutual rights and obligations between spouses, ensuring that women are afforded security and financial support, thereby enabling them to lead lives free from economic dependency or coercion (Ibrahim, 2019).

As societal norms and gender dynamics evolve—with increasing female participation in the workforce and shifts in familial roles, the application of Qawwama continues to adapt. However, its core essence remains unchanged: men bear the duty of providing financial, emotional, and physical support to their families. The way in which this responsibility is fulfilled may differ across cultures and historical contexts, demonstrating the flexibility of Islamic teachings rather than a rigid or outdated framework. This adaptability ensures that Qawwama remains relevant and applicable across generations, preserving its foundational values of care, protection, and ethical responsibility.

A Central Influence:

For over 15 years, I have engaged with men across diverse cultural and national contexts—from Afghanistan and Qatar to North America and Europe—studying how notions of masculinity are being questioned and redefined. My research, which involved in-depth interviews with Muslim men in Pakistan, Canada, Türkiye, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, revealed an ongoing shift toward alternative masculinities that emphasize emotional expression, caregiving, and gender justice. This transformation aligns with transformative learning theory, wherein individuals critically reflect on ingrained beliefs and actively work toward meaningful social change (Mezirow, 1997). For many men, key life experiences, such as marriage, fatherhood, or witnessing gender injustices, serve as pivotal

moments that prompt them to reevaluate their roles within their families and communities. Their evolving perspectives are not a rejection of Islam but a return to its ethical foundations, emphasizing justice, equity, and compassion.

A central influence in this transformation is the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) model of masculinity, which provides an alternative to rigid, patriarchal interpretations of gender roles. His rejection of coercion in marriage, his active participation in domestic life, and his emotional expressiveness challenge entrenched notions of male dominance. Many of the men we interviewed cited his example as a catalyst for rethinking their own masculinity by moving away from control and toward mutual support, care, and shared responsibility within their families.

Though this emerging paradigm of masculinity remains underexplored in both academic research and mainstream discourse, it signals a profound shift within Muslim communities. As men critically engage with faith, culture, and societal expectations, they are actively reshaping what it means to be a man, rooted not in dominance but in justice, responsibility, and compassion.

The transformation of masculinity is not happening in isolation; it is deeply embedded in local social structures. Across our research in Muslim-majority nations, we encountered men who are breaking generational cycles, ensuring their daughters receive an education, challenging domestic violence, and rethinking inherited norms. These shifts are not imposed from the outside but are emerging from within, facilitated by local scholars, community leaders, and grassroots movements (Hanafi, 2012; Mezirow, 1997). Initiatives engaging fathers, religious leaders, and educators foster a sense of collective responsibility, demonstrating that masculinity can evolve without abandoning religious identity (Abou-Bakr, 2013; Al-Hibri, 1997). However, it is unfortunate that this transformation remained largely invisible in Western discourse, which continues to portray Muslim men through outdated tropes of oppression and extremism (Moghadam, 2003). This reductionist framing not only

ignores the dynamic shifts taking place but also overlooks the role of Western interventions in shaping rigid gender norms in Muslim societies (Shahrour, 2015). In reality, change is unfolding through a process of internal critique and renewal—one that requires deeper engagement and community ownership rather than prescriptive solutions.

Conclusion:

Masculinity is not a rigid identity, but a fluid and evolving expression of values shaped by history, culture, and lived experience. The rise of reflective masculinities within Muslim communities marks a profound shift that embraces justice, compassion, and partnership as core tenets of manhood. It is time to move beyond outdated stereotypes and recognize the quiet yet powerful transformation taking place. This journey is not about abandoning tradition but about returning to the heart of Islam's teachings, where dignity, equity, and care define relationships. As hearts open and roles evolve, men and women step into a more balanced harmony, allowing families and communities to flourish. The path forward is illuminated by divine wisdom, guiding us toward a future where masculinity is not measured by dominance but by the strength of character, kindness, and compassion.

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