

Domestic violence is a grave problem that is often ignored and overlooked by society. The [statistics](#) are shocking if one looks into it. An anonymous [survey of 332 American Muslim](#) women over the age of 18 at five mosques in the greater Boston area revealed the DV rate to be comparable with that among American women in general. With this reality in mind, when the Quran says “beat them” about wives in “*nushuz*”(which is understood to be a state of rebellion) , it becomes extremely difficult for a believer to bypass the verse, and simply insist that Islam as a religion does not allow domestic violence without further examination.

Verse 4:34 is an important verse when it comes to setting marital dynamics in Islamic legal tradition. And it is also the one of the most problematic in its classical interpretation, in the modern context . The second part of the verse deals with marital disharmony:

.... good women are *qanitat* (commonly translated as obedient), guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear *nushuz* (rebellion), admonish them, then banish them to beds apart and strike them. But if they obey you seek not a way against them (4:34)

Classical Interpretations

The Prophet’s reported reaction to the revelation of Q. 4:34 represents a rare instance of the Islamic tradition presenting his sensibilities as being misaligned with Qur’anic teaching. In a *ḥadīth* on the revelation of this verse the Prophet is reported as saying, ‘I wanted one thing, but God wanted another’. The verse was universally understood in the premodern exegetical and legal tradition as permitting a husband under certain circumstances to strike his wife in order to discipline her. But most of the [classical commentators](#) tried to mitigate its implication by adding that the prophet never beat any of his wives, or beat anyone for that matter, and so, the beating should only be such that it leaves no mark or injury. Some scholars even said that the beating was only meant to be symbolic and so, the beating was to be done with a *miswak* (twig from a tree used as a toothbrush) or the fringe of a garment. According to Imam Shafi, the beating was an option to be used only if one was sure of a beneficial outcome, and even then, it was only to be done lightly, without causing injury. So, this verse has created discomfort for most scholars very early on.

Modern Interpretations

Many modern orthodox scholars and institutions continue to stick to the classical interpretations, insisting that the objective of the verse is to maintain marital harmony, that the verse has to be viewed through the lens of the prophet’s own example, who never hit any of his wives, and is reported to have made clear statements against the practice in multiple hadiths. Some of the scholars do go a step further and seemingly acknowledge the historically contingent nature of the Quran, as in this [article](#) from Yaqeen Institute:

“The presumption of male disciplinary authority in the household was common in most pre-modern cultures. In the pre-modern world, societies tended towards collectivism over individualism, and were thus hierarchically structured with the family as the basic unit, and the

male breadwinner as the *de facto* leader of the family responsible for the discipline of the children and his wife. Thus, writings in diverse civilizations often spoke candidly on this authority.”

But for many others, classical interpretations fall short because of this hierarchical outlook that the scholars took to the Quran, which they believe is contrary to the Quranic worldview. This leads to further scrutiny of the verse, its language, the context of revelation, and the context within the text of the Quran where this appears. The focus of these modern interpretations generally rests on the meanings of the key words- “*qanitat*”, “*hafizat*”, “*nushuz*” and “*wadribuhunna*”.

Two articles are the focus here: Saaqib Hussain’s article called [“The Bitter Lot of the Rebellious Wife: Hierarchy, Obedience, and Punishment in Q. 4:34”](#) and Azizah Y. al-Hibri’s article [“An Islamic Perspective on Domestic Violence”](#).

Qanitat- *Qanit* is used in the Quran exclusively for devotion to God, whereas the verb “*ata’a*” may be for obedience to God or anyone else. A wife’s obedience to her husband is not mentioned anywhere in the sura (al-Nisa), or in the Quran, not even in the passage warning the prophet’s recalcitrant wives, that is, Q 66:3.

Some classical jurists subsumed obedience to husband under obedience to God. Al-Hibri says that this borders on *shirk*, and notes how such an approach was also used towards the relations between people and their ruler. She writes, “To blunt the *shirk* edge of these arguments, jurists added that there is no duty to obey when what is required is against God’s injunctions. Islamic political history shows that this leads to an oppressive relationship which is arbitrary and willful, but makes no prohibited demand.”

Hafizat- It has the connotations of “keeping”, “protecting”, “guarding” etc. *Hafizat* is derived from *hafiz* which is defined as “one who keeps their covenant”. And she notes that a marriage contract is a “solemn covenant” according to the Quran. Righteous women are described by the phrase *hafizat lil ghaibi*. *Ghayb* usually refers to the unseen, but it has also been used in Q12:52, to refer to the absence of an individual. Exegetical tradition has universally understood *hafizat* here as meaning ‘guarding one’s chastity’, in the husband’s absence. The word *qanitat* is not separated from *hafizat* with a “*wa*” conjunction. Hence, *hafizat* is seen to be added clarification on *qanitat*. So, guarding one’s chastity in the husband’s absence (which was very common in the mercantile culture of that time) was made a duty towards God, who had guarded their chastity through marriage. (Hussain and al-Hibri)

Nushuz- This word is generally translated as rebellion, disobedience, recalcitrance etc. The word appears (in its imperative) form in Q 58:11 to mean “rise up”. The idea of rebellion stems from the idea of rising above something, in a spirit of arrogance. This word appears in the context of marital relations also in 4:128, where it deals with “nushuz” of the husband.

“If a wife fears (khāfat) nushūz or desertion from her husband, there is no blame upon them should they come to an accord, for an accord is better. Souls are prone to avarice, but if you are virtuous and fearful [of God], surely God is aware of whatsoever you do.”

Here is an excerpt from an Saaqib Hussain's article about this verse and its relevance to 4:34: "The *mufasssirs* almost consistently defined *nushūz* as used in this verse as distinct from the *nushūz* of verse 34, and rarely considered the verses together. While wifely *nushūz* was understood as disobedience, husbandly *nushūz* was often glossed as aversion or maltreatment of one's wife. Now, while it is perfectly possible for the same word to have different significations in different locations within a given text, the fact that *nushūz* is only used twice in the Qur'an, both times in Q. 4, and the fact that there is such patent symmetry in its use (a husband's 'fears' his wife's *nushūz* [v. 34], and a wife 'fears' her husband's *nushūz* [v. 128]) makes such radically different definitions of the word highly unsatisfactory."

Nushuz as marital infidelity- Many modern commentators see *nushuz* as referring to acts of marital infidelity or sexual impropriety. Al-Hibri suggests this based on the farewell sermon of the prophet and its focus on "*fahisha mubayyina*" (evident sexual impropriety), where he seems to be giving an example for the second part of 4:34. She also notes the reference to "in 4:19, and *fahisha* in 4:15-16.

Saaqib Hussain goes into a lengthy exploration in similar vein, comparing Q 24:2-10 (where the various scenarios dealing with accusation of sexual infidelity has been explained), verses 4:15-16 (that deal with *fahisha* and talks about punishment in less exacting terms), and 4:34 (which he sees as dealing with a husband's suspicions of infidelity on the part of the wife). He also compares Q4:34 with *sotah* laws in Jewish tradition that also address suspicions of wifely infidelity. He further explores the usage of the word *nushuz* in Arabic literature (including poetry and hadiths)- where the core idea of "a woman wanting to run away" is a figure of speech for existing or prospective involvement with another man.

Daraba- This word appears as a verb in the Quran in 55 places and the meanings vary, and include to strike, to set forth, to set an example, cast, present etc. Translators like [Laleh Bakhtiar](#) (The Sublime Quran) and [Safi Kaskas](#) have translated "wadribuhunna" to mean "move away from them" or "depart from them".

"If you have reason to fear ill-will from your wives, remind them of the teachings of God, then ignore them when you go to bed, then depart away from them." (Safi Kaskas translation)

Some, like Saaqib Hussain and Shabir Ally of "[Let the Quran Speak](#)" have posited that the striking mentioned in 4:34 is not addressed to the husband, but to the community, and requires stronger evidence than for the steps to be taken before it (admonishing verbally followed by separation). Q 4:34 as well as Q4:35 refer to the couple in the third person. This is how verse 35 begins- "and if you fear a breach between the two..." This is the reason why verse 34 (since verse 35 is a continuation of it, with very similar diction) also can be understood to be addressing the community. Involvement of the community in matters of marital disharmony is a recurring Quranic theme (see 2:229).

Reflection

Discuss other interpretive strategies and opinions about this verse. Are there any problems in the interpretations discussed above?