



Violence against Women and Girls:

RE-EVALUATING MAINSTREAM ISLAMIC UNDERSTANDINGS

Learners' Manual

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global issue that affects women and girls from different backgrounds, faiths, and races. According to the United Nations, one in three women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime - mostly by an intimate partner¹.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on Muslims and the Muslim faith. We have seen a number of Islamophobic attacks across North America as well as greater scrutiny on Muslim women in our communities. Furthermore, with the #MeToo movement, there is now an international discussion on violence against women and girls in general.

As noted, VAWG affects every community, religion and race. This manual recognizes this and doesn't seek to single out a particular religion for gratuitous purposes.

Rather, it is a sincere attempt to understand Islam's real approach to VAWG issues - an understanding that is divested from any cultural, sectarian or cultural accretions that may have been added over the centuries.

My research in this area of work has found that some mainstream Muslim interpretations of Quranic verses and reported Prophetic traditions are misunderstood and misconstrued to justify violence against women and girls.

For example, throughout North America there have been cases where Imams and community leaders have encouraged Muslim women to go back to their abusers in order to 'work on the relationship' or 'keep the family together at all costs'. There is also often an undue apportioning of blame upon the wife if there is a marital dispute - with the blame being based upon a presumption that she has somehow displeased her husband.



¹ <https://www.bustle.com/articles/174534-9-stats-about-violence-against-women-girls-you-should-know-for-orange-day>

In parts of the Muslim world, especially within fundamentalist movements, we have seen Muslim women being stoned for adultery or punished for being raped or refusing to enter into a forced marriage.

In addition to the violence that women are subjected to during times of peace, women are especially vulnerable during times of war. In refugee camps around Lebanon and Jordan, there have been reported incidences of 'temporary marriages' of girls as young as twelve with men as old as fifty. Misinterpreted Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions are used by the perpetrators and the community to justify such acts.



The organizations that attempt to address VAWG issues often fail to explore the specific and traditional religious validations that are used to justify these practices. Often, Muslim organizations offer bland general statements against VAWG that appear more like political clichés than anything stated with real conviction - supported by a well-worn theological quote or two.

This does little in terms of reassuring and educating either Muslim women (or men) - or, indeed, the general public, as to the real position of Islam and the Quran on such matters.



This manual seeks to take a small step in addressing this gap by making valid theological counter-responses to VAWG practices in a format that is readily available and easy to read - especially for women and girls.

Responding to the absence of such a resource for women and girls is what this project aims to achieve. The manual attempts to explore some of these religious justifications in detail ² - providing a context and understanding to the Muslim community and beyond - so that any false justifications can be put to rest if appropriate.



The manual also seeks to be a resource to those working in the VAWG field so they they are able to offer explanations and address these issues effectively.

Ultimately, the spirit and approach of the manual is one which follows a central Quranic dictate which states:

“

“O you who believe! Be steadfast maintainers of justice, witnesses for God, though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kinsfolk, and whether it be someone rich or poor, for God is nearer unto both. So follow not your caprice, that you may act justly. If you distort or turn away, truly God is Aware of whatsoever you do.” (4:135)

And God Knows best.

² The topics covered in this manual are Female Genital Mutilation, Domestic Violence, Early/Forced Marriages, Hijab and Niqab.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING

Around 200 million women and girls around the world presently suffer from the often awful consequences of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which is also known as Female Genital Cutting or even euphemized as 'female circumcision'.

FGM consists of all procedures that involve altering or injuring the female genitalia for non-medical reasons and is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. The consequences of FGM to women are severe and can result in death, reproductive complications as well as severe psychological trauma.

FGM is practiced primarily in 28 countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, but globalization and the increased movement of people has made it a global issue. Research shows that FGM is now found in Europe, the United States, and Canada.

Although the practice is illegal in an increasing number of countries, it is still carried out upon an estimated three million girls every year from varied religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds - but with a large percentage being from Muslim communities.

Types of FGM

Type I: Clitoridectomy	Partial or total removal of the clitoris
Type II: Excision	Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (the labia are the 'lips' that surround the vagina)
Type III: Infibulation	Narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner or outer labia, with or without removal of the clitoris
Type IV: Other	All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area

Source: World Health Organization

Islam and FGM

Although the practice dates from the pharaonic period of Ancient Egypt – it appears to retain its hold on many social groups to the present day because of social, cultural and religious imperatives.

This leads to a variety of different justifications that enable the practice to continue in a particular community – and each situation needs to be countered with the appropriate expertise and sensitivity.

But, with regard to Muslim communities still practicing FGM, some progressive Muslims strongly believe that the supposedly religious and 'Islamic' arguments that are commonly used to support this abominable practice need to be thoroughly discredited and abandoned once and for all.

The reason we can be so sure Islam stands unequivocally against FGM is because of the Quran's categorical warnings that such gratuitous mutilation of the body is inspired by the Devil himself.

The Quran quotes the Devil who says:

“

"I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle...and to deface the fair nature created by Allah." (4:119)



Some traditional Muslims who continue to support FGM choose to ignore the above counsel from the Quran, and instead take recourse in unsubstantiated sayings attributed to Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) – such as a tradition in which the Prophet is supposed to have witnessed a female 'circumcision' taking place in passing and asked for it to be of the 'lighter' type.

As a result, many Muslim schools of thought ('madhabs') today hold the position that FGM of this 'lighter' type is a legitimate tradition ('sunnah') and that, as such, it is an acceptable, but not obligatory, practice. A large number of scholars argue, however, that the historical authenticity of this particular tradition is totally unsound and unsubstantiated - meaning that it cannot rightly be introduced into Islamic law and practice, and that the severity or 'lightness' of the actual action is of no consequence to its forbidden status.

For example, alcohol is well known to be forbidden by the Quran - and it makes no difference whether the alcohol is strong or 'light'. The practice is forbidden as a whole - just as gratuitously defacing the fair creation of God is also strictly forbidden.

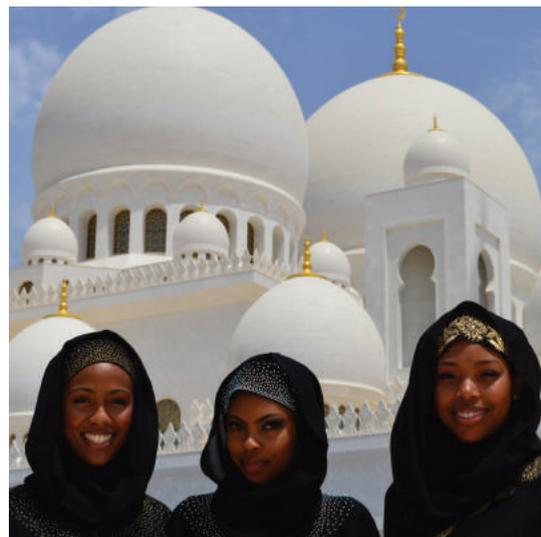
Another argument of pro-FGM advocates is to equate it to male circumcision - but, here, both medical practitioners and religious scholars are unanimous in saying that there can be no anatomical comparison between the two practices. Male circumcision, they argue, carries significant medical benefits around cleanliness while, anatomically, it is more like the

removal of hair or nails - as opposed to excising an integral part of a woman's central nervous system.

Much of the above evidence would seem to make it clear that there is little or no formal or authentic authority in Islamic law - and more specifically the Quran - for allowing a practice like FGM.

Unfortunately, however, not all religious practices are based upon the formal or authentic precepts of their faith, and therefore, pseudo-Islamic justifications for FGM still play an important part in the continuation of the practice in Muslim communities.

This is especially so when the 'religious' component is mixed with cultural notions of honor, chastity or superstitious belief.



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1) Why do some Muslims practice FGM/C?

Because it is wrongly equated with purity and chastity - and further reinforced by 'weak' or unsound traditions of the Prophet that claim he witnessed but never objected to the practice. These spurious religious arguments are also buttressed by literally centuries of tradition and custom (from pharaonic times) that have meant FGM just became a fact of life - like any other rite of passage.

2) Is there a 'hadith' (story of the Prophet) that allows for a 'lighter' version of FGM/C?

The most commonly used 'hadith' for those who support FGM is as follows:
'A woman used to perform circumcision in Medina. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said to her: Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband'. (Sunan Abu Dawud).

It is important to note that 'hadith' such as these were compiled around 250 years after the death of the prophet - and this particular story was declared as 'unsound' (unreliable as being true) by the compiler himself (Abu Dawud).

Unfortunately, this doesn't discourage those who choose to support the practice - because they feel that erring on the side of greater 'purity' is better than abandoning the practice altogether. A sort of, " *But what if the saying is true - ?*" attitude seems to prevail.

What they fail to realize is that in their misplaced zeal - there lies no connection between FGM and 'purity' and also that they are actually countermanding clear directives not to mutilate the body from the Quran itself, such as in the verse given above.

3) Is male circumcision Islamic?

Male circumcision is a tradition that is practiced by Judaism and Islam. Although not mentioned in the Quran, it is considered to be an assured tradition ('sunna muakkada') of the faith.

However, any attempt to equate male circumcision with FGM is dishonest – because physiologically male circumcision is the removal of a simple appendage like hair or nails, while FGM (even in its supposed 'lightest' form) affects an integral organ of the central nervous system.

Also, male circumcision is traced to the founder of monotheistic religions, Abraham, while FGM is an evil tradition from the time of pharaonic Egypt.

4) What should I do as a Muslim woman if I'm a survivor of FGM?

More than anything else, any woman, Muslim or otherwise, who has undergone FGM needs to see herself as a resilient survivor. If she has ongoing physiological problems, then of course she needs to get medical advice and counselling support as well if necessary.

Unfortunately, medical and other support is often not available to girls living in poor and remote communities – which is one reason why international aid agencies need to make reaching these victims a priority.

In all cases, however, it is important that those who seek to eradicate FGM do not make survivors feel hopeless about what has happened to them or, indeed, about their futures. But, they also all need to make sure a survivor's daughter does not go through the same ordeal. That is the balance that needs to be sought.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Violence against women – particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence - is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. Global estimates published by the WHO indicate that about 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.

Most of this violence is intimate partner violence. Worldwide, almost one third (30%) of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner in their lifetime. Globally, around 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner ³.

In the Muslim community, the consensus of scholars is that Islam condemns all forms of emotional and physical domestic abuse wherever it may occur. However, across the globe, there are many traditional sections of

the Muslim community which believe that spousal abuse is legitimized by the Quran under certain circumstances.

This perception arises from Verse 4:34 in the Quran which can be translated as follows:



"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because God has given the one more (strength) than the other and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in (the husband's) absence what God would have them guard.

As from those whom you fear ill-conduct [first] advise them, [then] forsake their beds, and [finally] separate from them ['idrabahunna' - separate / shun / beat / bed them]; but if they return to obedience, then do not seek against them a way. Indeed, God is Most High, The Greatest" (4:34)

³ WHO <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

The key word here in Arabic is 'idrabahunna' which carries numerous meanings - some of which are given in parenthesis above; (separate / shun / beat / bed them).

Given the traditions of the time, medieval Islamic scholarship has generally chosen to understand the word as 'beat' - and this, regrettably, remains the orthodox mainstream position, (although almost always qualified by the word 'lightly' even in medieval times).

Increasingly, however, some contemporary Islamic scholars argue that the word 'idrabahunna' when used correctly and in the context of the verse actually means 'to shun them', or 'to turn away from them', or, 'to separate from them'.



Their reasoning is based upon the correct grammatical use of the word, the example of the Prophet as being known never to have struck any woman or child, and also upon the general exhortation in the Quran that consistently calls for harmony and reconciliation between married couples - such as in the verses given below:

“

'And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them and He has put love and mercy between your hearts; verily in that are signs for those who reflect.' (30:21)

'They [spouses] are clothing for you and you are clothing for them.' (2:187)

'But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good.' (4:19)

These Quranic exhortations stand in stark contrast to 'beating' being any part of a marriage partnership.

And this loving standard is further embodied by the Prophetic example itself through the reported affirmation. that:

“

"The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family", and that, "The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives."
(Tirmidhi)

Tragically, and despite all the evidence and divine counsel such as that given above, domestic violence is still disturbingly – and unacceptably – prevalent within Muslim families and Muslim societies.

We should be clear, however, that while there are inevitably many sociological reasons for its occurrence (such as patriarchy, poverty, etc.), any justification for domestic violence on religious grounds relies almost exclusively upon one key word within a Quranic verse (‘*idrabahunna*’) being understood as ‘beat’ - rather than as ‘shun’ or ‘separate’ (from a spouse).



Based upon the alternative interpretations and understanding of the Quran, all Muslims should reject any notion of domestic violence and spousal abuse within Islam.

They should also not fear the process of reinterpretation and re-appraisal of the Quran since our collective understanding and learning are encouraged by the Quran itself, when it says:

“

"Those who listen to the Word, and follow the best meaning in it: those are the ones whom God has guided, and those are the ones endowed with understanding".
(39:18)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1) Why is the punishment for marital rape directed at women?

Marital rape as a crime is likely not to exist in most interpretations of the 'Sharia' (Islamic law). This is because it is seen - as was the case until very recently in the West - to be a wife's obligation to accede to her husband's every wish.

Therefore, it is not that a wife is formally punished in any case of marital rape, but rather that the violations against her are not seen as a crime for which the husband may be punished.

But, we can see from the many verses of the Quran (above) that exhort couples to live in peace and harmony, it is clear that any forced interaction between husband and wife is an anathema to Islam and to an Islamic marriage.

2) Are women and men to be stoned for adultery?

Stoning for adultery is mentioned as a punishment in the Torah, but it is actually not mentioned anywhere in the entire Quran. Mercifully, stoning is very rarely carried out as even in medieval times judges went to extreme lengths to avoid the punishment; (there being only one reported stoning during the entire Ottoman caliphate over centuries, for example).

There is, in fact, a very specific punishment for adultery in the Quran - for either males or females - which involves 100 lashes. But, stoning has taken formal precedence because of numerous stories purport to it having been used as a punishment during the time of the Prophet.

Many have challenged the veracity of these stories (typically compiled around 250 years after the death of the Prophet himself) and point to the fact that in orthodox Islamic law nothing may take precedence over the commandments of the Quran.

Stoning should, therefore, be considered as entirely illegitimate in Islamic law.

3) Why do people say it is okay to hit your wife with a 'miswaak'?

A 'miswaak' is typically a small narrow wooden stick that is used to clean and polish teeth. They usually measure the same as the palm of a hand and are around a centimeter in thickness.

Traditional interpretations of the Quran hold that a man may 'beat' his wife as a final step in settling a dispute - but many recent interpretations (see above) say that the word in question should not be understood as 'beat' but 'separate'.

For those who still hold to the traditional view, they qualify the supposed permission to beat by using a reported tradition which says that striking a wife may only be done with something as small as a tooth stick while also avoiding the face.

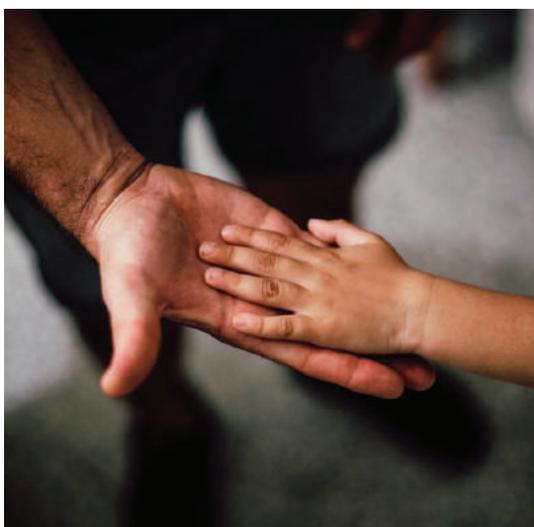
While this qualification seeks to insert some civility into their interpretations of 'beating', the understanding which says that a husband must separate from a wife to resolve a heated dispute make far more sense from the outset.

EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGES

Early and forced marriage is a near-universal problem in the world, with an estimated 650 million women alive today who were married as children. This includes around 250,000 in North America alone during the first decade of this millennium.

The Quran describes marriage itself as a 'Solemn Covenant' between two willing parties – thereby comparing the weight of its responsibility to God's covenants with each of His prophets or His covenant with the people of Israel regarding the Sabbath. ⁴

It stands to reason that 'Solemn Covenants' are too weighty to be entered into by children.



More specifically, the Quran also equates marriageable age with 'sound judgement' on matters of property and wealth as well as 'full strength' and physical maturity – where it says:



'Assess the orphans until they reach the age of marriage; if you then find sound judgment in them, release their property to them; but consume it not wastefully, nor in haste against their growing up.....'
(4:6 part)

'And do not go near to the wealth of orphans except with that which is best until he reaches his maturity..'
(6:152 part)

Therefore, according to the Quran, sound judgment, physical maturity and a sense of responsibility adult enough to enter into a 'Solemn Covenant' willingly – are all essential and defining criteria upon entering into a marriage.

⁴ 'Joseph Islam; The Quran and its Message';
<http://www.quransmessage.com/articles/about%20the%20author%20FM.htm>

Most regrettably, however, there are many Muslims who apparently ignore these Quranic precepts by claiming historical sources which say that Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) married one of his wives (Ayesha) as a child – and even sometimes use this to claim child marriage as something permissible.

In doing so, they are either ignoring or refuting the Quranic parameters as given above, or claiming that the Prophet rebelled against these parameters, (an impossibility for believers to accept).

Furthermore, they are choosing to believe the veracity of contested historical narrations, while ignoring a number of other sources that put Ayesha's age of marriage in her late teens; (including that of the Prophet's earliest biographer, Ibn Ishaq).



Forced Marriages

Regarding forced marriages – there is little doubt but that almost anything done through force in Islam is considered invalid, including religion itself:

“

'Let there be no compulsion in religion; the right path has become distinct from the wrong...' (2:256 part)

It is, therefore, obvious that everything else flows from this fundamental of freedom and dignity, including the freedom not to be coerced into a marriage - as stated below:

“

'O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion. Nor should you be harsh with them...' (4:19)

In addition to the Quranic stipulations, there are a number of sayings reported from the Prophet himself on the issue - examples of which are given below:

"A previously married woman must not be given in marriage until she is consulted, and a virgin must not be given in marriage until her permission is sought..."

"An orphan girl should be consulted about her marriage; if she remains silent, this is her permission, but if she refuses, there is no forcing her."

Furthermore, there is some evidence that as the leader of his community, the Prophet allowed some forced marriages to be annulled upon the complaints of women.

Finally, it is important to distinguish between forced marriages and 'arranged' marriages.

An arranged marriage simply means that a third party – often the parents or other close family members – introduce a prospective bride or groom to each other. It has the advantage of being a collective effort and it often brings the desired results.

While, on occasion, arranged marriages can result in a lot of pressure being applied to a reluctant young man or woman – they should have the comfort of knowing that they are under no religious obligation to accept an unwanted proposal.



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1) Did the Prophet marry nine-year old Ayesha?

In the Quran, as noted above, there can be no marriage until both parties are physically and mentally mature. Therefore, it is considered impossible to consider that the Prophet would have gone against this guidance and married a child.

The story of Ayesha's age relies on a few reported stories that emerge primarily from an old man who was considered senile at the time he was asked a question about Ayesha's age.

Because of his senility, many other stories originating from this same individual were rejected by scholars of the time as totally unreliable – but this particular story of Ayesha's age became part of folklore some say mainly because of the Prophet's enemies.

2) What is the legal age to get married in Islam / What is the acceptable age for Muslim boys and girls to get married?

This depends upon the country in question – and it will vary slightly depending upon local customs, etc. The important thing in religious terms is that both parties be physically and mentally mature (as noted above) and that there be no coercion in coming to an agreement.

Where this happens to be ignored – the deficiency is with the people and not with the religion.

IS THERE A DRESS CODE FOR WOMEN IN THE QURAN?

"O ye Children of Adam!

*We have bestowed clothing upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. **But the raiment of piety / righteousness is the best.** Such are among the Signs of God, that they may receive admonition!" (7:26)*

The basic principle of any dress code for both women and men in the Quran is modesty.

It is very important to note that the first verse addressing this issue is actually directed towards men, not women :

“

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: ... that will make for greater purity for them: And God is well acquainted with all that they do" (24:30)

The importance of emphasizing this point should not be understated – because in most social orders the emphasis for modest behavior and dress has invariably and unduly been placed upon women. The behavior of men has been largely ignored or excused.

The Quran makes clear – right from the outset - that this should not be the case. A functioning and healthy social order needs both men and women to reciprocate decent civilized behavior towards each other.



The verse that immediately follows then speaks specifically to women - and starts with almost exactly the same words:

“

"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; ... (24:31 part)

Therefore, we can see that for both men and women, the guiding and overriding principle is modest apparel and modest behavior – in the form of modest clothing and lowering one's gaze; (ie, not staring lustfully at someone).

Some commentators have also noted that the verse does not address men and women directly, but, instead, addresses them as a third party; ie, *'And say to the believing men....women'*.

The significance of this, they argue, is that this makes the verse more of a general exhortation – rather than a direct commandment. And that, as such, the emphasis is upon personal responsibility and discretion – rather than any uniform dress code or overly strict behavior.

From this 'third person' exhortation the first and guiding principle is towards modesty – both in dress and in behavior. And modesty, in itself, is a general precept that is relative to time and place which demands personal engagement and personal judgement.

Unfortunately, there are many (especially among men when ordering around women) who dislike the notion of any personal discretion with regard to dress codes, and they would far rather pretend that the Quran commands a specific uniform that must be observed to the letter.

While this may seem simpler and more convenient to them, for example, when talking to their teenage daughters, many parents soon realize that if an individual is not personally engaged and convinced about religious guidance – then both dress and behavioral codes can easily be circumvented and ignored.

Furthermore, a young woman may equally wonder why a parent only addresses her dress code and behavior and not her that of her brothers, when we can see that the fundamentals apply to both equally.



The verse above that applies to women does go on to suggest more specific actions with respect to women, simply because of the nature of their greater beauty, attraction and vulnerability:



*"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; ... [and] that they should not display their adornment **except what is apparent of it** and that they should draw their **shawls / head covers** over their **cleavage / openings** and not to display their adornment ...except to [family members, etc]. (24:31 part)*

In this part of the verse, there are three expressions / words (highlighted in bold above) that are important to gaining an understanding of the verse; namely:

- i) The phrase ' **except what is apparent of it** ';
- ii) **Shawls / head covers**
- iii) **Cleavages / openings**

i) Understanding the phrase 'Except what is apparent of it...':

The first issue and phrase 'Except what is apparent of it' has been understood by the vast majority of scholars to mean that the face and hands are included as part what is ordinarily apparent to both women and men in daily life – and that functioning with these covered is unnatural, excessive and impractical.

Furthermore, those who contend that face and hands should be covered would be hard pressed to then explain exactly to which other areas of the body the phrase 'except what is apparent of it' applies - ? (There would literally be no areas of the body left).

This phrase, more than any other argument, discredits the religious legitimacy of the full or partial face veil that is seen in some Muslim countries and communities across the world.

The face veil is often considered to be a sign of piety and conscientiousness, but it is only so if one considers an exaggeration to the Quran's commandments to be a righteous thing. Many would argue that an exaggeration, in fact, amounts as much of a deviation from God's Word as a shortcoming.

It is equally important to note, however, that should a woman chose to wear a face veil out of her own free will - it really is no business of a man, or indeed the state, to ban or punish her for doing so.

A woman who wears a face veil may choose to do so because she is sick of being stared at like a piece of meat by men on the streets – and she may also feel a face veil brings her closer to God.

But, from an Islamic point of view, while she can legitimately claim all of the above, she cannot in all reasonableness say she is wearing a veil upon the authority of the Quran – which also means that she should not object or complain about Muslim sisters who do not choose to wear a face veil based upon their understanding of the given verses.

ii) Shawl or head covering?

The second term that needs further examination is '*Bi khumurihinna*'.

The understanding of this term (of which the noun is '*khimar*') centers around it either being a general shawl or a more specific piece of clothing that is used to cover the head.

In both cases, the Quran stipulates that the piece of clothing in question should be drawn down by women over their chests as a cover of modesty.

The significance of discerning between head covering and shawl is that it is the only reference in the Quran to women covering their hair and head.

Given the present day emphasis upon the 'hijab' (or head scarf) amongst Muslim women and girls, one might have presumed a more direct reference to the 'hijab'. (The word 'hijab' does occur in the Quran a few times, but in totally different contexts to women's dress).

Therefore, the term '*Bi khumurihinna*' means either (or both) of: 'Draw your shawls over your chest area', or, 'Draw your headscarves down over your chest area [as well as covering your head]'.

Those who argue for the latter interpretation do so upon on the basis that Arab women during the advent of Islam were thought to wear head scarves bound around their hair only - and that this verse was asking them to extend the covered area down over the chest and neck area.

They also argue, fairly convincingly, that hair itself should be considered as an 'adornment' for women - and that the verse does also state that women should not display their adornments ('except that which is naturally apparent ...').

Consideration of hair as an adornment should be qualified by the manner in which it is worn: Hair can be worn in a predominantly functional manner for work or whatever, and when worn as such, it is hardly an 'adornment' over and above the everyday natural form.

That is very different to hair worn in an extravagant or lustrous manner - where it then does become an adornment for women and, as such, should only be displayed in front of family members, etc., and not amongst the general public and strangers.

iii) Covering the chest area / cleavages / openings

The term in question here in Arabic is '*layubunna*' - and technically it can mean a pocket or an opening or a cleavage or even a heart.

Most scholars interpret the word as referring primarily to the chest area and cleavage of a woman, and that the provision, as noted, is that a shawl or head covering should be pulled down over the cleavage and chest area as an appeal to modesty.

Others, however, extend this to the 'cleavage' or opening under the arms, for example, which would suggest that sleeve less tops that expose the armpit area should also be discouraged.

The other area of 'cleavage' or opening is of course the crotch area, and all interpretations of the verse in question are that this should also be covered and concealed as part of modest attire.

Another important verse relating to clothing reads as follows:

“

“O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should bring down over them their outer garment: that is most convenient, that they should be recognized and not given trouble. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”
(33:59)

This verse is relatively straightforward in meaning and asks that believing women wear an outer over-garment over their clothing – as a convenience that allows them to move around freely without inadvertent exposure, and also so that they may be recognized as pious women who should be respected.

The term used for the outer garment is *'jalabibihin'* and while there are many specific suggestions as to what type of garment this refers to – the most reasonable understanding is that it can be any sort of outer garment that fits loosely over and around dresses, shirts, etc., according to what is most appropriate to local custom and culture.

It may also be worth noting that there are other stipulations related to coverings and public behavior that relate specifically to the Prophet's wives - but that these address very particular and stressful situations that cannot be made into a general rule for all Muslim women.

For example, one verse starts with the clarification that, *"O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any other of the women..."* and then exhorts them to be additionally careful and reserved in their public interactions.



In summary we can say that any dress code in Islam has to be based upon the following factors:

- i) The best garment is the garment of piety.
- ii) All clothing and behavior should be underpinned by the desire for modesty – and this applies equally to both men and women.
- iii) Women are asked not to display their adornments of beauty – except those which are naturally and functionally apparent; (ie, face and hands).
- iv) In addition, women are asked to cover their chests with their shawls or head scarves.
- v) Women are also asked to cover their hair – when it is displayed as an adornment.
- vi) And, women are asked to use an outer garment for practical convenience in their daily lives and to be recognized and respected as women of modesty.

While some (men especially) would prefer that these stipulations be molded (by male scholars for example) into something much more specific and categorical and restrictive – the whole point of this and all other Quranic guidance is precisely to leave it up to the individual to believe or not to believe in the guidance being offered.

Time and time again, the Quran insists that 'there is no compulsion' in matters of religion – and that there is no value in a 'forced' belief.

Therefore, in the matter of a dress code for women or for men, it is safe to say that there is no single uniform, and that there should be no exaggeration of the guidance into face veils and such to satisfy one's own notions of piety.

But, likewise, one should also try one's best to be modest and respectable both in dress and behavior, in order to help one live a safe and God-conscious life.

CONCLUSION

The issues addressed in this manual impact the lives of millions of women and men on a daily basis – but they represent only a small number of other VAWG and social issues that are also extremely important and worthy of constant examination and further understanding.

And, as important as such issues are, it is the spirit of enquiry and the sincere attempt to reach the truth of a matter that should be the main takeaway from a manual such as this one.

In the Muslim world, there are two major factors that prevent young women and men from approaching religious issues with a feeling of safety, sincerity of purpose and a sense of resolve.

The first is the notion that everything and anything 'religious' belongs firmly in the realm of 'the scholars' – and that the job of ordinary folk is to ally themselves to a particular scholar (or sect) and simply consume everything he/she has to say.

Thus, in their eyes, the acquisition of knowledge in conventional Islamic circles is primarily something one consumes and memorizes, not something one builds and develops.

This approach, of course, pays no heed to the fact that Islam is unique in not having a priestly hierarchy that places itself between an individual and God, and that the Quran repeatedly asks every believer to think and ponder upon the Signs of God for themselves.

Of course, it is not scholarship that is at fault here - we all need scholarship and rigor and sincerity when seeking knowledge. Rather, it is the practice of exclusively and blindly following a scholar or sect that makes people into passive consumers of whatever comes their way.

The second great barrier that makes a young Muslim person wary of further examining religious edicts – is the deep fear of 'reform'; changing things from the way they presently are.

This is partly because everything has become so polarized within and outside the Muslim world, that any and every change is viewed with suspicion and as having being inspired to accommodate 'the West' or maybe even to accommodate some other Islamic sect or school of thought.

Undoubtedly, many will consider some of the conclusions reached in even this manual, for example, as an attempt to accommodate the West or similar.

But, what such speculation and criticism fails to appreciate is that the approach taken within this manual is, first and foremost, a return to the Quran as the primary source of understanding and induction – while ignoring the centuries of cultural, gender and sectarian accretions that have inevitably been added into the practice of Islam (and, indeed, every other religion as well).

The reference point should always be understanding of what God wishes for as worship – which we equate with the Truth - and that everything else should then become irrelevant; i.e., whether a particular position is pro or anti 'the West', or pro or anti a particular sect, scholar and so forth.

And, finally, it may be worth noting, from the Quran itself, two crucial principles that underpin all of the above and which have been mentioned earlier in manual:

The first concerns the absolute need for justice when seeking an understanding and true practice of one's religion, where the Quran says:

“

“O you who believe! Be steadfast maintainers of justice, witnesses for God, though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kinsfolk, and whether it be someone rich or poor, for God is nearer unto both. So follow not your caprice that you may act justly. If you distort or turn away, truly God is Aware of whatsoever you do.” (4:135)

And the second great principle is to recognize one's own role and responsibilities in the process of understanding and worshipping, where the Quran commands us to be of:

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“Those who listen to the Word, and follow the best meaning in it: those are the ones whom God has guided, and those are the ones endowed with understanding.” (39:18)

And God knows best.

Violence against Women and Girls:

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