

RFCS

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

Insights and Perspectives

No. 007 - August 2023

Religious Narratives on Marital Responsibilities: Asatizah's and Muslim Community's Perspectives

Ustaz Dr Mohammad Yusri Yubhi Md Yusoff

Associate Member of Fatwa Committee



Introduction

A strong and healthy marriage is built upon the principles of *qiwāmah* (spousal guardianship), *nafaqah* (financial support) and *qānitāt* (righteous devotion and obedience). Misunderstandings regarding these principles have often led to discord and challenges in marriages. I wanted to gain insights into perceptions and understandings of these principles currently perpetuated within the community, to assess if there is a need to evaluate them for the purpose of strengthening marriages. I gathered data primarily through the participant observation method during marriage counselling sessions and Continuing Professional Education (CPE) training sessions for the *Asatizah* organized by the *Asatizah Recognition Scheme Office (ARSO)* of *MUIS* held from July 2021 to July 2023. *Asatizah* today are offered comprehensive training sessions covering key topics such as, “Domestic Violence According to Islam”, “Navigating the Ups and Downs of Marriage: Nurturing Functioning, Happy Families”, “Mental Health From the Perspective of Islam” and “Women’s Discourse in the Quran”, aimed at equipping them with contextualized knowledge to help them address common religious narratives exploited in marriage, thereby enriching their counseling for couples.

Religious narratives on marital responsibilities as perceived by the community

The concept of *qiwāmah* in the context of marriage is derived from the *Qur’an*, verse 4:34. Some segments of the community, as highlighted by contemporary scholars interpret *qiwāmah* as signifying the husband’s superiority over the wife, emphasizing their leadership and guardianship, but without acknowledging the additional duties and responsibilities that they are commanded to carry out. Also, many Muslim couples are observed to have adhered to understandings of obedience to the husband without limits, even in situations where the husband errs or demonstrate *nushūz*, such as restricting the wife from visiting her ailing parents. Moreover, some segments of the community, including the *Asatizah*, interpret *qiwāmah* as suggesting women’s emotional and intellectual inferiority compared to men, drawing from verses like 282 in *Surah al-Baqarah*. Another observation was a prevailing misconception regarding decision-making dynamics within marriages, where husbands are often assumed to hold absolute authority without the necessity of consultation or *shūrā* with their wives, disregarding the collaborative nature that *qiwāmah* implies, where decisions should be made through mutual consultation and exchange of perspectives between spouses. These misinterpretations underscore the importance of revisiting and reevaluating the community’s understanding of *qiwāmah* in order to avoid further exploitation of narratives linked to it.

Another common misconception among many Muslim couples is limiting *nafaqah* to mean pocket money. *Nafaqah* in fact is more extensive and pertains to fundamental financial provisions which include paying for housing, bills, food, groceries, clothing, and to some extent,

Religious Narratives on Marital Responsibilities

medical and educational expenses for the family. Unless one is the sole breadwinner, provision of pocket money, in light of dual-income marriages where both spouses earn income, is viewed as an additional gift and thus discretionary. Complications arise when husbands exploit wives earning an income and neglect or adamantly refuse to fulfill their *nafaqah* responsibilities in full. These husbands expect the working wife to share the financial load and contribute more to the household, or worse still, take over as the main provider for the family. Additionally, the modern reality of wives juggling both work and homemaking roles, often without spousal assistance, worsen strains between couples and intensify their marital conflicts. Moreover, poor financial management, including a lack of awareness of monthly expenses, cash flow problems and outstanding debts, are variables that contribute to couples resorting to divorce.

Accusations of disobedience or not being *qānitāt* stem from misunderstanding the concept which has often been misconstrued as blind obedience. For instance, in divorce cases where husbands neglect *nafaqah* or mistreat the wives, certain religious narratives have been exploited to stigmatize divorce as displeasing to God, consequently labelling a wife seeking divorce as sinful and disobedient. Similarly, if a wife, facing emotional distress or abuse, chooses to leave the house without the husband's permission, the narrative exploited stress the husband's absolute authority, deeming the wife disobedient for asserting autonomy. In scenarios of sexual intimacy, religious narratives have been exploited by husbands to castigate wives who reject sexual advances, claiming angels would curse them. These scenarios reflect the prevalent understanding in the community that compliance in all situations is necessary to avoid being labelled as disobedient or guilty of *nushūz*. The exploitation of such narratives clearly contribute to misconceptions, potentially perpetuating unjust treatment of wives. More seriously, the internalization of these misconceptions by wives themselves may perpetuate a cycle of suffering and silence for those enduring neglect or mistreatment within their marriages.

Suggested approaches for establishing new narratives

In re-shaping the narratives of religious texts regarding marital relations, several suggested approaches aim to foster a more nuanced and inclusive understanding. First, and foremost, any reinterpretation of religious texts including the Quran and Sunnah should be guided by the principle of *wasāṭiyyah*, emphasizing justice, excellence and balance. Additionally, a comprehensive and holistic comprehension of religious texts, avoiding a narrow interpretation of isolated verses, is crucial for profound understanding. When addressing marital roles and responsibilities in the shaping of new narratives, a crucial focus should be placed on helping couples fulfil the *maqāṣid*/goals of marriage such as *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* (tranquillity, love and mercy). Considering the perspectives of both genders will also contribute to a more compassionate and inclusive outlook on marriage.

Conclusion

In re-shaping the narratives of religious texts regarding marital relations, several suggested approaches aim to foster a more nuanced and inclusive understanding. First, and foremost, any reinterpretation of religious texts including the *Quran* and *Sunnah* should be guided by the principle of *wasatīyyah*, emphasizing justice, excellence and balance. Additionally, a comprehensive and holistic comprehension of religious texts, avoiding a narrow interpretation of isolated verses, is crucial for profound understanding. When addressing marriage responsibilities in the shaping of new narratives, a crucial focus should be placed on helping couples fulfil the *maqāṣid*/goals of marriage such as *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* (tranquillity, love and mercy). Considering the perspectives of both genders will also contribute to a more compassionate and inclusive outlook on marriage.

About Author

Ustaz Dr Mohd Yusri is an associate member of the Fatwa Committee and a member of the Appeal Board for MUIS. He earned his PhD in Usuluddin and Comparative Religion at the International Islamic University of Malaysia. His dissertation investigated the concept of wasatiyyah, particularly in the works of Egyptian Ulama Mahmud Shaltut (former Shaykh Al-Azhar 1958 -1963). He completed his first degree in Usuluddin, majoring in Hadith at Al-Azhar University, Egypt, before pursuing the Master of Usuluddin (Hadith) programme at the University of Malaya. Additionally, he holds a Diploma in Counseling Psychology from the Academy of Certified Counselors, Singapore. Ustaz Dr Yusri's extensive experience include roles as Naib Kadi at the Registrar of Marriage (ROMM), arbitrator (hakam) in the Syariah Court of Singapore, board member of the Yayasan Mendaki, member of the Board of Trustees (Scholarship) at LBKM, member of governors of Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, and panel member of the PERGAS Postgraduate Scholarship committee. Moreover, he is an active member and Counsellor for the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) since 2002. Recently, he was appointed as the Chairman of Singapore's oldest mosque, Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka. In his counselling practice, Ustaz Dr Yusri founded YusriYusoff Consulting, offering an integrated approach that combines religious, person-centred, and family system therapeutic methodologies to provide comprehensive and holistic support to individuals and families.

About RPCS

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.

Unless specifically stated otherwise, the author's opinions in this piece do not necessarily reflect RPCS' official position. This commentary's publishing copyright is owned by RPCS. Without RPCS' consent, no portion of this article may be duplicated, saved in a retrieval system, or transmitted electronically or otherwise. These commentaries may not be reproduced without prior permission from RPCS and due credit to the author(s) and RPCS. Please email to Editor RPCS Insights and Perspectives at RPCS@muis.gov.sg.

RPCS

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS