



musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

The Interpretive Legacy of *Qiwamah* as an Exegetical Construct **Omaima Abou-Bakr**

In this chapter, Omaima Abou-Bakr examines the construction of *qiwamah* as a concept that sanctions male authority and hierarchal gender rights in the family. She documents significant changes in understandings of verse 4:34, and shows how exegesis of the first phrase – ‘men are *qawwamun* of women ... evolved into an independent and separate (trans-contextual) patriarchal construct’.

In the first part of the chapter, Abou-Bakr analyses the four discursive stages through which exegetes formulated this construct over the course of ten centuries. In the initial stage, the descriptive ‘*qawwamun*’ is turned to a normative or prescriptive conception, signalled by the transformation to a grammatical *masdar* (a verbal noun or infinitive). In the second stage, the hierarchal concept is consolidated through compiling reasons for the superiority of men and the inferiority of women. In the third stage, the exegetes expand the concept by linking it to *darajah* (degree) in verse 2:228 and selected *ahadith*. In the final stage and with the modernist turn, the concept is linked to the ideology of domesticity and women’s *fitrah* (created nature). Abou-Bakr’s analysis starts with the tenth century exegete al-Tabari; then moves on to a number of subsequent influential medieval exegetes such as al-Zamakhshari, al-Razi, al-Baidawai, al-Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir, as well as the sixteenth-century exegete al-Suyuti; and lastly she examines the relevant work of modernists such as Muhammed ‘Abduh, Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Mitwalli al-Sha’rawi.

In the second part of the chapter, Abou-Bakr reviews the interpretive approaches used by contemporary Muslim feminists and reformists to rethink *qiwamah*. These approaches can be summarized as follows: understanding *qiwamah* as conditioned and changeable; contextualizing the concept textually by interpreting it within the totality the Qur’an’s non-patriarchal thrust or within whole verse units; situating *qiwamah* within the broader ethical paradigm of the Qur’an; or transcending the text all together. Abou-Bakr highlights the discursive strategies of these approaches in that they divest *qiwamah* from meanings of domination and authority; decentre it within the overall construction of Islamic marriage; and restrict its application to the specific contexts of the relevant Qur’anic verses.

She concludes that *qiwamah* in verse 4:34 is ‘not hierarchy, not moral superiority or paternalism, not divine favouritism, not authority or sovereignty, not an absolute, unqualified right to rule and lead, not a fixed honorary status, not the privilege to spend, and not an exclusive right to earn money and be the sole breadwinner’. She suggests there are other interpretive possibilities worth pursuing, and that future research could focus on how to understand the concept in a more holistic and gender-sensitive manner.