



musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

An Egalitarian Reading of the Concepts of 'Khilafah', 'Wilayah' and 'Qiwamah' Asma Lamrabet

In this chapter, Asma Lamrabet proposes a feminist Qur'an-centered interpretation of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* that reclaims the positive and empowering meanings of the two concepts as found in the sacred text. She argues that three interrelated Qur'anic concepts embody the spiritual message of Islam, which centres on the notion of justice and instructs us to be faithful to the egalitarian thrust of Islam in both the public and private domains. These three concepts are: *istikhlaf*, *wilayah*, and *qiwamah*.

Lamrabet explains that *istikhlaf*, derived from the term *khilafah*, refers to the equal responsibility that is required of both women and men, as God's vicegerents on earth, to contribute to the building of human civilization.

The second concept, *wilayah*, articulated in verse 9:71, explicitly calls on both male and female believers to be mutually supportive of one another, and to 'do the common good' and 'forbid the bad'. Lamrabet points out that this Qur'anic understanding of *wilayah* affirms equality between men and women and obligates both to take part in the public task of enabling the fulfilment of the good and just, and the stopping of the harmful.

Lamrabet explains that the third concept, *qiwamah*, comes from the word '*qawwamun*', which is mentioned in three Qur'anic verses – 4:135, 5:8, and 4:34. In the first two verses, the term is used to call upon both believing women and men to realize 'fairness, justice and careful judgment' in the public space. Lamrabet points out that it is this meaning of *qiwamah*, as 'self-imposed obligation of fairness, justice and careful judgment', that captures the essential meaning of the concept in the sacred text. But in interpreting *qiwamah* in the private sphere (derived from verse 4:34) and promoting this understanding, jurists not only distorted but also overshadowed other key aspects of the concept throughout the exegetical tradition. In classical and modern exegesis, *qiwamah* in the private sphere changed from being one way of organizing family life and spousal roles to provide for the needs of those who are deemed to be vulnerable in the family, to a construct that sanctions male superiority and female dependence and inferiority. This prevalent understanding of *qiwamah*, however, contravenes the text's message for both women and men in verses 4:135 and 5:8 and diverges from the Qur'an's vision of marriage as a relationship based on love and tenderness (30:21). Also, this understanding of *qiwamah* does not take into account that the organization of gender roles in families changes over time as the contexts and lived realities of people change. A close and integrated reading of the divine text, Lamrabet argues, would show that the Qur'an does not prescribe fixed gender roles for spouses.

Lamrabet concludes that reinterpreting *qiwamah* and *wilayah*, by reclaiming their Qur'anic meanings and linking them to the other related Qur'anic concept of *khilafah*, is a necessary endeavour to produce new reform-centred and context-sensitive feminist knowledge that highlights the spiritual message of Islam.