



# musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

## **Understanding *Qiwamah* and *Wilayah* through Life Stories** **Mulki Al-Sharmani and Jana Rumminger**

This chapter discusses Musawah's Global Life Stories Project, which documented and analysed the life stories of fifty-eight Muslim women in ten countries (Bangladesh, Canada, Egypt, Gambia, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Philippines and the United Kingdom) to better understand how women actually experience the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*.

The first section outlines the objectives of and process through which the Global Life Stories Project developed as a participatory feminist research enquiry conducted by teams of Musawah Advocates in the ten different countries. The second section discusses the Islamic ethics and feminist research principles that guided the project and how these were applied. The enquiry was designed to be appreciative of alternative forms and sources of knowledge; focused on building relationships of trust, respect, care and reciprocity; participatory on multiple levels; reflective; and transformative.

The third section explains the analytical framework used to make sense of the documented life stories, including identification of patterns, interpretations, norms, laws and/or power structures in the stories that are traceable to the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*; examination of how *qiwamah* and *wilayah*-based norms may have impacted women's choices and access to rights, resources and opportunities; understanding of how women made sense of their experiences; and analysis of differences within each country and between countries in terms of women's experiences, choices and views.

The fourth section outlines some findings that have emerged from initial analysis of the stories, organised into six themes: 1) the myth of the male provider and women's economic roles; 2) sexual relations and rights within marriage; 3) polygamy; 4) divorce; 5) contemporary problems of male guardianship; and 6) women's self-knowledge and relationship to tradition and authority. The analysis shows the striking disconnect between the construction of gender roles as dictated by the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and the lived realities of many Muslim women in the participating countries. Many women play active economic roles in their families, and they do not receive the male protection and sustenance that are promised to them by the legal postulates of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*. Yet women's economic contributions to their households do not necessarily lead to egalitarian gender relations, and husbands or guardians often retain control and authority over their wives and female wards and continue to claim hierarchical rights accorded to them by the two concepts, even when they are not fulfilling their juristic duties.

The final section presents the authors' reflections on the layered significance of the project, the challenges encountered by the project team, and the multifaceted impact of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in women's lives. The authors shed light on the process of building

new knowledge about *qiwamah* and *wilayah* that foregrounds lived realities of women. In particular, they highlight the trajectories through which shifts and developments take place for both the researchers and the resource persons who narrated their stories in terms of their self-knowledge and relations with normative systems and structures of external knowledge in their lives.