

Musawah Webinar: A Feminist Quest for Qur'anic Justice, Beauty and Spiritual Care
5 May, 5PM KL | 11PM Cairo
Transcript

Note: Text edited for grammar and readability

Sarah

It's 11AM, so we will start in the interest of time. Assalamualaikum, welcome everyone and thank you for joining us in our first Ramadan webinar.

We wish all of you who celebrate this sacred month Ramadan Kareem. We hope this month is giving you the space to nurture and heal your souls with love, compassion and kindness.

My name is Sarah Marsso, and I will be your moderator during today's exciting feminist conversation for Quranic justice, beauty and spiritual care.

I coordinate Musawah's knowledge building activities and I'm thrilled to be hosting this session today, with the ground-breaking feminist scholars Omaima Abou Bakr, Asma Lamrabet and Mulki Al Sharmani.

Our speakers will address 4 sets of questions: (1) experience of engaging with tafseer from a gender perspective, (2) introduce us to their new holistic interpretative methodology, and (3) reflect on their relationship to the Qur'anic text, and (4) explore the different ways in which the Qur'an gives us the path towards healing.

Before we start, I have a few housekeeping items to cover about this presentation. Participants joining us on Zoom will be able to ask questions using the Q&A button at the bottom of the screen. If we don't get to your question during today's webinar, please follow up with us via email afterward. Unfortunately, we won't be able to take questions from those viewing this webinar on FB. Please do not use the chat function to ask questions - please only use that if you're experiencing technical difficulties, and one of our team members will be there to assist you. This webinar is being recorded, and we will send you the link to the webinar recording, including all the relevant links shared during the event.

Now we can begin :)

The month of Ramadan is often known for its fasting ritual, and less for the celebration of the Qur'an, which was revealed during this holy month, the 27th night or one of the odd nights after the 21st.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is God's speech sent upon the Prophet Mohamad SAW, through the angel Gabriel in the 7th century. This happened during his seclusion in the cave of Hira on a mountain near Mecca, in Saudi Arabia.

The Qur'an is a living text that holds different names, such as *nur* (light), *huda* (guidance), *tanzil* (sent down, with movement) and *dhikr* (reminder); all these names and others reflect the multidimensional aspects of this text, that is both a source of guidance, of healing, but also calling for reflection and conversation.

The first revelation was a dreadful experience for the Prophet, who sought refuge in the arms of his wife Khadija. A prophetic experience [which] that shows that the divine word holds deeper meaning, and quoting Khaled Abou El Fadl, we can never dare think that we do in fact understand.

The world is going through a watershed moment, one that pushes us to reflect individually and collectively about the meanings of life. Many of us are experiencing profound feelings of anxiety, fear and insecurity and we are seeking sources of comfort and hope.

In times of crisis, we find contentment in the continuous remembrance of the presence of the divine, its presence in nature, its presence in hardship, in joys, in others and in ourselves.

This remembrance, this *dhikr*, can happen in our fasting, in our prayers, in all sorts of meditations, but also in the reasoning with the Qur'an, the *tadabbur*.

How can we find this light in the midst of darkness? How can the ethical teachings of the Qur'an help us to pursue a life based on justice, beauty, compassion, and harmony for individuals and communities?

To discuss this, we are privileged to have with us three feminist scholars:

Omaira Abou-Bakr, who is a professor of English and comparative literature at Cairo University. She co-founded "The Women and Memory Forum", and is a member of the Musawah Knowledge Building team. She is the author of numerous publications on mysticism, theology and gender issues in Islamic discourse.

Asma Lamrabet is a hematologist and a writer. She is a founding member of the Fatéma Mernissi Chair at Mohammed V University in Rabat, a member of the Moroccan National Committee on Education and Culture and of the Driss Benzekri National Institute for Human Rights. She authored several books and articles on women and Islam.

Mulki Al-Sharmani is Associate Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Helsinki. She is also a member of the Knowledge Building Working Group at Musawah. She is the author of numerous publications on gender issues, family law and Islamic legal tradition.

You can access their full bios on our website.

So, without any further ado, let's embark on our quest with our honored guest speakers.

Omaima, Asma and Mulki, you are working together as part of Musawah's research initiative. This project is one of the very few spaces in which feminist scholars are invited to come together to read, reflect on and interpret the Qur'an.

Omaima, can you share with us what has brought you to this place where you decided to engage in tafsir and own that process of reading the Qur'an from a gender perspective?

Omaima

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim, thank you Sarah and friends from Musawah for hosting this event and inviting us to participate. As you were saying Sarah, in your introductory comments, the Qur'an is God's direct speech to us. Needless to say it is Muslims' foundational source and referential text. We seek guidance from it, in all aspects of our life.

For me personally when you ask about the tafsir or interpretation, I've always been interested in hermeneutics as a critical theory in general. In that aspect of textual interpretation, in tafsir literature, the Qur'anic commentaries specifically. I always think to myself that this is where it all started before it got complicated.

Hermeneutics, or tafsir, or interpretation specifically, sparks that kind of deep reflection--the *tadabbur*--that is incumbent upon all Muslims. It is a duty and a right to seek that direct engagement with God's text, with God's words to us. For Muslim women specifically, it is all the more important to seek that direct experience with the Quran, the text, with that independent quest for justice, for beauty. I say independent because independent from decades and centuries of patriarchal intercession, patriarchal mediation in understanding. This is what we mean by that 'feminist lens', that feminist approach. You're looking for that egalitarian ethic that we believe is so much part of the core message of the Qur'an that has been missed by decades and centuries of being interpreted, particularly when it comes to gender relations.

The Quran to me is a living entity that I have to meet halfway, so to speak. Just as for all Muslims, for all believers, the Qur'an is a text that guides, enriches, gives light. The believer also has to have an innate *fitri* (moral sense), an innate love of that revelation and you meet the Qur'an halfway. So you bring that moral sense, you bring that quest for justice, beauty and egalitarianism to the text as well to be able to see it as God intended for humanity.

Sarah

Thank you Omaima, this is enlightening. Thank you for reminding us that it is our prerogative, our duty and our right to engage in this Qur'anic process of meaning making, which for the past centuries has been dominated by men, and in particular by patriarchal voices.

Asma, you've been working on developing an emancipatory reading of the Qur'an. Could you please tell us why is it necessary for women to engage with this kind of readings?

Asma, we can't hear you. Your mic is muted.

Now? Yes

Asma

So Bismillah. Salam to to everyone. First of all, thanks to Musawah for organising this beautiful event. For your question, you know, Sarah, yes, it is necessary and important to engage in this reading because this is all about knowledge, and knowledge is power everywhere. Especially in religion, where it represents the sacred power. So if you don't have knowledge, you can't think or choose for yourself. Even if we had, during long time in the Islamic civilisation, many Muslim women as *alimat*, they have always been marginalised by the patriarchal mentality and very few of them will engage with *the tafsir* (hermeneutics) of the Qur'an. There are only men who, for centuries, have always had access to religious knowledge. They had the sacred power, which is also political power, and it's the same - an eternal link between religion, patriarchy and political despotism.

From my own experience, personally it was for me a big and deep challenge. I came from a religious and traditional society and family. At the same time, my generation was facing modernity with its new concept of gender equality, emancipation, and freedom. We had this modernity and our traditions. For the Islamic tradition, modernity, especially for women's emancipation, was absolutely incompatible with Islam. For modernity, religion is the symbol of women's oppression. So for the Islamic discourse, if you want, you know to be a good Muslim, you have to accept everything --to be *ta'wa*, you know the famous juristic concept of *ta'a* (obedience)-- without asking any questions because it is God's will.

For us as women, we have a difficult choice to make, but really personally I didn't want to give up. I just wanted to be both--modern and Muslim woman.

So I decided, in the beginning of my quest of spirituality that I have to work by myself and for myself. I didn't want for someone to tell me what is *halal* and what is *haram*. I decided to do my own research, to see what does the Qur'an say and what it doesn't say.

It was a long journey of struggling, like 20 years ago now, and I'm still struggling because knowledge, the Qur'an says, is like an ocean without limits. You need a huge capacity of endurance and especially because you are a woman. So, you will never really know what are religious rights and experiences as a human being, as a woman liberated by God, without Islamic and Qur'anic knowledge. The theological and patriarchal systems have used this ignorance, and our ignorance in this field to impose on us their patriarchal reading, or whatever they want, so we have no other choice but to recover this Islamic and Qur'anic knowledge from

our context, and from our perspectives as women, who have the capacity of reasoning as given to us by God.

So I will finish with this image where you can see a woman inside a locked cage, but they forget the key inside, and the Quran is the key.

Sarah

Thank you Asma. A very powerful image that speaks by itself and as you've rightly pointed out we can only do the work by ourselves. It is a long and very difficult quest for knowledge that is particularly necessary for women and those who are marginalized, who have been silenced for so long.

Mulki, what was the most inspiring aspect of this unique collaboration with Omaima and Asma? How empowering this was?

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim, assalamualaikum to all of you. Thank you for your interest. Thank you Sarah and Musawah for organising this. Happy to be in this *sahbah* (in this company). To answer this question, Sarah, I think there's a lot inspiring and empowering about working with Omaima and Asma. I would say it is because we share two quests: one is a spiritual and faith-based quest. We share a faith-based position, believing that the Quran is sacred, meaningful and relevant to us. And also a faith-based belief that God has entrusted us with the *amanah* (the obligation) to seek knowledge. Those who know and those who don't know are the same, as the Qur'an tells us, and to do justice, "Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct" <16:90> and to do the good and the beautiful. So that's on the spiritual quest.

But I also share with them --this is very much an intellectual quest. This intellectual quest has a number of dimensions. One is to study the Qur'an and specifically focus on and try to learn and make explicit its ethical worldview. What is it teaching us ethically? What are its central ethical messages and how are they important for how we derive norms from the Qur'an and from the tradition that was produced around the Qur'an.

And the second dimension to that intellectual quest is engaging with the Islamic interpretive tradition, in this case the *tafsir*, with humility, with seriousness that this rich tradition deserves, with rigour, and also with a very critical thinking approach, and focusing on two questions that are interconnected: the question of methodology--how did certain interpretations become authoritative and specifically in regard to the question of gender.

In this intellectual quest--we're also adopting an integrated approach. It's part of a larger quest, where a group of Muslim women and men are working with us through Musawah led research project in collaboration with a number of universities, where we also engage with other genres in the interpretive tradition like the *usul-al-fiqh*, like the *fiqh*, like sufism, like Muslim family laws and most of all the lived realities of women and men in different parts of the world.

The larger questions that we're speaking to, you could say assumptions that we're questioning, through our intellectual quest, is this idea that religion and sacred texts are irredeemably patriarchal and that there is no space in them for justice. We are questioning that through a very rigorous intellectual inquiry. We are also questioning this idea that faith-based inquiry cannot be rigorous, cannot be epistemologically meaningful as well as ethically important. So these are the key things that I find, and I am very privileged to be working with Omaima and Asma and to learn from them and other very outstanding women scholars with whom we get to collaborate in this project and the previous one that we're building on, and I hope we'll get a chance to talk about the work of these women as well.

Sarah

Thank you very much Mulki, and what a beautiful way to see this intellectual and spiritual quest as an *amanah* from God, this responsibility.

Thank you. Your work is spiritually uplifting. You're planting the seeds for a three-women's-voices holistic exegesis of the Qur'an; and we're thrilled to be able to discuss this with you today.

Omaima, can you share with us what are the main gaps that you identified in the exegetical tradition?

Omaima

The exegetical tradition - First of all the lack or the absence of a consistent, comprehensive, ethical outlook on the Quran as a whole, that would govern all interpretations, that would govern all *surahs*, all verses. There is not enough emphasis on every individual verse or surah on what is the divine intent and edification. What does God want to teach us here? From this verse? From this surah? From this instance? What is the moral that we can derive, even behind historical verses that are rooted in specific historical occasions? There is still a moral, still an edifying moral behind it. What is the general ethic of egalitarian and other kinds of Qur'anic ethics? How does that apply to the interpretation? We don't see that a lot, or methodically, or consistently, to govern the exegetes' outlook. That's the first thing that you notice when you examine that tradition.

Secondly, as a result of most of the classical commentaries, I'm talking about the genre of the Qur'anic commentaries, not the theoretical works or philosophy works of ethics, but in terms of the overall *tafsir* of the Quran. Exegetes of course, naturally, went surah by surah, verse by verse, piecemeal bit by bit, to explicate and to comment and to deduce rulings as much as possible from the verses, but rarely with deeper connections between the verses or between the surahs in ethical meaning, or in discourse, or in justice discourse. Not etymologically and not philologically. The exegetes were very clever, of course in examining the Arabic language of the Quran, the etymological roots of particular words--they would make that connection between verses, but not the ethical connection. For instance, if you have a verse--one or two of three verses that talk about the basic equality of human beings in creation and in reward and in

punishment--that should be connected to other specific verses on gender, on orphans, on women, on marriage, on divorce, to make that connection in a discourse, in this very specific egalitarian discourse.

That's what Muslim feminists scholars have been calling for for decades, not just starting today. Look at the ethics, the spirit of the egalitarian ethics of the Qur'an and make that connection; don't ignore the equality verses, for instance you know, the three famous very well-known equality verses in the Qur'an...there is no time to go into them now. You know, you look at the exegetical tradition, they didn't inspire them to talk about how revolutionary these gender equality verses were. They didn't attract their hermeneutical attentions, sort of. Anyway, that's the second point.

The third point was a disconnect between the ethical that I keep talking about and the legal. The exegetes were obsessed with formal correctness, with legalism, with seeking the exact time of the waiting period, the exact time when...with all these technical details, and forgot to link it all with what's the ethical intent behind it, what is God's intent behind it. That's how it got more complicated with jurisprudence and with the juristic discourse particularly, not just the *tafsir*.

Again, naturally, a natural force, a consequence of that is the patriarchal assumptions of the ages took over. The patriarchal lens, in looking at the verses and at the Qur'an, governed the interpretations, governed the discourse and it was allowed to take over. That's what particularly, in the gender verses and in the verses about men and women, about marriage and divorce, assumptions about men's superiority, about men's authority, about men's prerogative to control, about the lesser stature of women--these were all taken for granted, so to speak, cultural assumptions of the ages. These were allowed to govern how they looked at the Quran and the kind of knowledge they produced, without putting into perspective, without Muslimats' perspective. Right? The Qur'an is for women and men.

Until we reach the point where we have a conception of marriage, particularly in the juristic discourse. It's a very explicit definition of marriage, that is, another form of slavery. It is indeed a contract of provision in exchange for sexual access, in exchange for obedience and legal sexual access. By the time you reach there, for us Muslimat, you look at the juristic and the classical definition and description of marriage and you say, where did they get that from? It's not in the Qur'an, so where did they get it from? So we'll end with that.

Sarah

Thank you Omaima, for outlining these gaps so clearly and showing how this lack of a consistent and comprehensive ethical outlook allowed patriarchal culture to dominate the interpretive discourse around gender issues in the Qur'an.

Mulki, in addressing these gaps, you are developing this new methodology, and we understand it is still a work in-progress. Can you briefly share with us what are the different dimensions of your new reading?

Mulki

Yes, certainly. The first very important dimension to it, and it's also a premise. We are working from the premise that the Qur'an has a coherent ethical worldview, and central ethical principles that are the guiding framework for the process of deriving norms, laws. Although it's a premise, it's sort of a hypothesis that we also want to make explicit. It's an objective, like..we are assuming this, this is our assumption, this is our hypothesis, but part of our work also is to make explicit that ethical worldview. And this is something that others have been interested in: traditional scholars, not so systematically, and a lot of modern scholars now realise the importance of that.

Because we believe that it has this ethical worldview that we are trying also to investigate, we think the best way to read is thematically - what does it have to say about marriage and different aspects of family life, about relationships with other communities and so on. What happens if you read the Qur'an thematically, how does that help you get at that ethical worldview and that leads us to the importance, when you read it thematically, it means you also pay attention to how certain parts of the Qur'an speak to other parts of the Qur'an, which is what we call the *tafsir al qur'an bil qur'an* (exegesis of the Qur'an by the Qur'an) and also is something that has been done and is done now. This is very relevant to the thematic approach. It means you have to see how the different parts speak to each other.

As part of that, to pay very close attention to key terms. So if we're working on marriage, what does it mean that marriage sometimes is described as *mithaq* (covenant) and *mithaq ghaliz* (important and solemn covenant). But '*mithaq*' is also used in other parts of the Qur'an. What's the linkages? So paying attention to key terms that have to do with the theme we're working on but also paying attention to what we call the ethical directives. These ethical terms that recur in the Qur'an and are not haphazard at all. Where they occur in the verse, in every unit of the verse, and as a thematic whole as well. Whether it's *taqwa* (God consciousness), or *ma'ruf* (what has been known to be good), *ihsan* (goodness and beauty), '*afw* (forgiveness), *fadl* (graciousness), and how its always taken back to the relationship between *al insan* -the worshipper, the seeker- and the Creator, Allah.

Another important element of our methodology is paying very close attention to the historicity of the Qur'an, the historical dimensions of the Qur'an. What does it mean that the Qur'an was revealed in 7th century Arabia? How do we read the verses that are grounded in 7th century Arabia? The idea behind this is not to say "OK, these verses are not relevant to us because this is about 7th century Arabia" but because we are interested in uncovering the Qur'anic ethics, we're interested in these historical verses as well. What is the ethical intent behind it and how is that relevant to us and to different contexts? Because of these different dimensions and because of our starting point and our goal of an ethical reading, of uncovering the Qur'an's ethical worldview, it makes very much sense that we adopt a holistic approach. An approach that pays attention to the historical and the universal, and the ethical and the normative, that pays attention to the linguistic aspect, and to the inter-textual approach as well.

Sarah

Thank you very much Mulki for sharing with us very briefly a deep work that is still in progress, and we are very much looking forward to reading your paper and perhaps also *InshaAllah* a book, why not?

Asma, can you share with us one example of how your feminist holistic reading can be applied to a specific verse?

Asma

There is a good example of this feminist, holistic and ethical reading that we can apply in the first verse of Surah An-Nisa. This is the first *ayah* (verse) of Surah An-Nisa, one of the longest surahs in the Qur'an. The denomination of this Surah An-Nisa which means woman is not a coincidence, you know, because, here, it is important to highlight this denomination because this *ayah*, in this surah, which is mostly talking about instructions, mainly to men, about the protection and care for women, and widows, orphans, and female orphans. Because all these people were the oppressed of the oppressed in the Arabic context of the 7th century.

It seems that Asma is facing some difficulties. Please bear with us with the internet difficulties, as we are trying to get Asma back.

Hello?

Hello, Asma, can you hear us?

I'm sorry I have a bad connection this morning. I don't know why.

It's alright, no worries. Thank you Asma.

OK, so the importance of this surah, because it is all about the oppressed as women. We have two dimensions in this ayah - a global part about human equality, and basic equality between men and women. So we have many key terms in this *ayah* which are very, very important. Are you hearing me?

Yes very well. Yes we can hear you Asma :)

We have many key concepts here. The first is *nafs wahida* (one soul, or one essence); we have the concept of *zawjuha* (equal pair or mate), we have the concept of *taqwa* (a global moral and inclusif concept), the key concept of *arham* (plural of *rahm*, wombs). In the ayah we have many points. It first begins with the promise of universality, because the *ayah* is an order to all humans, "Oh People!", *Ya ayuha nas*.

The second point of *taqwa*, which happens twice in this same *ayah*. This is particularly important because *taqwa* involves many meanings, it's a complex concept, and we can't reduce it only to fervoured devotion or fear from God. *Taqwa* is an ethical concept that includes many other ethical values, for example wealth, '*khayra az adi taqwa*' ("the best of wealth is *taqwa*" 2:197), it's linked to forgiveness, '*wa an ta'fu aqrabu lil taqwa*' ("forgiveness is closer to *taqwa*" 2:237); it's linked to solidarity '*wa ta'awunu 'ala lbirri wa taqwa*' ("you have to cooperate with virtue and *taqwa* 5:2); it's linked to justice '*dilu huwa aqrabu li taqwa*' ("to be just is closer to *taqwa*" 5:8), it is also closer to moral interiority '*wa libasu taqwa thaliqa khayr*' ("the dress of *taqwa* is the best one" 7:26), it is also linked to dignity '*akramakum 'inda lahu atqakum*' ("the most virtuous for God is the one who has *taqwa*" 49:13). Here is an example of an inter-textual reading. It was already a methodology used by some scholars in other topics as Mulki said the القرآن يفسر بعضه بعضا "*al Qur'an yufassiru ba'dahu ba'dan*" (the Quran explains each other).

The third point is the heart of this *ayah* is the *nafs wahida*. This is the central concept of this *ayah*, which means the essence, one common source of the human being created from this one same essence; so God created all humanity from this unique source.

The fourth point, *zawjuha* (the mate or pair), God created from the original source from the *nafs wahida* it's partner, which is frequently interpreted as Eve or as woman. This is absolutely wrong. We can also see that the word *nafs* is feminine in Arabic, while the mate *zawjuha* is masculine. We can see this symbolically as reciprocity, if you want, in human relationships without hierarchy or any categorisation.

The fifth point is from these two parts of the couple, *nafs wahida* and it's partner *zawjuha*, God created many men and women '*batha minhuma rijalan kathiran wa nisa'an*'.

And finally, the last point is *arham*, which is the plural of *rahim* (womb), the maternal one. The verse ends by highlighting *taqwa* for the second time but with reference to *arham*, so it means compassion in family relations through the feminine expression of *arham*. It is very important to remember that the Qur'an links the human creation to *nafs wahida*, to the womb, in three different verses. This one, the first verse of Surah An-Nisa but also in Surah An'am in the context of pregnancy '*hamalat hamlan khafifan*' (she bears a light burden and carries it about 7:189) and the other a verse in Surah Az-Zumar '*yakhluqukum fi butunu umhatikum khalqan min ba3di khalq*' (He created you in the wombs of your mothers, creation after creation, 39:6)

We see the connection between the human creation from *nafs wahida* and the *arham* (womb), and *arham* comes from *rahmah*, and we see the deep link between the Creator, whose name is coming from the word mercy, you know *rahmah*, He is *Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim* (the most Merciful of the merciful ones), and those *arham* (wombs) are a source of life. So *rahmah* links maternity and maternal attributes, and as Ibnu Arrabi said *rahma is the wujud*, the existence.

It's also important here to note that we don't find in this verse nor in any other Qur'anic verse the smallest connotation that Adam is the *nafs wahida* as the first human being, or male human

being. And we don't find any reference to the secondary or marginal creation of Eve, whose name is not mentioned in the Qur'an anywhere, and also there is also no word about woman being created from Adam's rib, as said in some hadiths. The Qur'an does not represent any hierarchical or other view of man and woman. So there is no discrimination, no prioritization of one sex over another, or one person over another person.

So all the *ayah* is about finally, is the equal human creation from the one source, from the *nafs wahida*, the equal creation of man and woman within universal diversity and human multiplicity, and all this is deeply linked to two important ethical values: *taqwa* as God veneration but also as the quest for justice and *arham*, as the feminine expression of compassion in the name of God. So this is a very good example of an *ayah* which represents a central ontological, holistic and ethical framework of God universal and gender equality. It is one of the most important verses about the full humanity of men and women.

Sarah

Thank you very much Asma for a very clear articulation of your methodology. We can see how through your approach the ethical goals of this Qur'anic worldview are not trapped in the historicity of the social construction of the verse, but rather it is the ontological equality between all human beings that becomes the heart of the message.

The Qur'an is a living text, and our relationship to this text is dynamic and it changes throughout our life experiences. How would you define your relationship with the Qur'an? What were the verses that you found most challenging, and what were the ones that were uplifting and guiding you throughout this journey?

Omaima, would you like to start?

Omaima

For all of us, the Qur'an is a light, and it is such a solace, needed solace, in this difficult life. It really is. Personally, when I read it most of the time, I feel it directly speaks to me. *Subhanallah*, there are many verses, despite the fact that they may be very grounded in the historical occasion of the verse, or part of a bigger narrative, but some verses have these two sides: the historical contextual side but then they just emit universal truths, or truths about the the human condition or human experience, or about women's experience, by the way, like the verses on pregnancy and motherhood. So it's very close; it's a text that can be very close, and it speaks to me directly most of the time. Most of the verses cultivate this sense of intimacy and reciprocity between us as believers and the Divine, Allah SWT. There are many verses that tell us that God is near; that God knows what is in our hearts.

Waah la nubikum, I was reading that verse the other day --"He knows you best". How true, how very, very true. Or this, reciprocity: "God gives you goodness, so that you give Him back goodness". "Do goodness as God grants you goodness". All these verses are very, very touching and needed.

The verses that have *asma ul husna*, that have God's beautiful names: ar-Rahman, ar-Rahim, ar-Rauf, al-Wateef, al-Wadud, al-Kareem. These are everywhere and when you read it, you feel it tugs at your heart.

One aspect that specifically also speaks to me is the aesthetics of Qur'anic textuality. That also I respond to it very much. The metaphors, the structures of language, the repetitions, the echoes, the reverberations all over the text. It's like responding to a work of art. As we said we need *tadabbur*, the reflections of the mind and also the heart. And you need an innate sense of morality and of beauty.

Challenging verses. Of course there are challenging verses that make you stop and think and make you feel a little bit uncomfortable. The verses that seem to prioritise men, that seem to give men privilege over women, you know concepts like, or terms like *qiwamah* or like *darajah* in Al-Baqarah:228, or even *daraba*. Some of these things will make any believer stop and think.

But then you learn how to resolve them eventually through that journey, that difficult journey that Asma was talking about. The journey of *tadabbur* and reading and reading and studying, and understanding Qur'an's logic and Qur'an's moral world, and put that in the context of that ...comprehensive moral world of the Qur'an. You learn to differentiate between patriarchal, and social and cultural constructions of these concepts. How these concepts like *qiwamah*, or *darajah*, were blown way out of proportion, out of importance even, by Qur'anic standards, while other verses have been just ignored or not looked at. So you learn to differentiate between that and you learn discernment, what Mulki mentioned. This is a duty, for all Muslims, particularly Muslimat (Muslim women).

Sarah

Thank you Omaima for this enlightening response. A text that is very close, that cultivates beautiful intimacy between us and Allah, but also as you rightly pointed out, when you face challenging interpretations it is important to learn how to stop, reflect and separate the context, the social construction from what we feel in our hearts is just.

Asma, how would you define this relationship with the Qur'anic text?

Asma

I can define my relationship with the Qur'an as a relation of love, compassion but also reason. Because I have always had this intense need [for] rationality and spirituality at the same time. It is a question of harmony between intellect and faith and reason. For the Qur'an, you know itself mentions *al-qalb* (heart) and *aq'l* (reason) go together, so they have the same meaning. There is a beautiful link between *al aq'l wal qalb* (reason and heart) in a beautiful *ayah* that says, "Have they not travelled through the earths, and have hearts by which to reason 22:46 " .

The most challenging verse was for me maybe the verse 34 on *qiwamah* in Surah 4, Surah An-Nisa. Because when you read it, for the first time you feel like you have a gender hierarchy and because the majority of classic *mufassirun* (exegetes) interpreted it, you know the main verse, to support the authority and the domination of all men over all women. But in fact, after many research, when you go deeply in this holistic and ethical vision approach of the Qur'an, you see that *qiwamah*, you can name it *qiwamah khassah* (private *qiwamah*) because it is specific to the family, is about men providing their wives *bima 'anfaqu* (by that which they spend), which is so banal over time and context. It's not about power or honorability, but about responsibility.

So the reading of this *ayah*, with the holistic, intertextual and ethical-oriented approach shows us that there are other meanings of the verses, which are important also, and egalitarian, which have never been valued in the traditional and classical tafsir. For example, other verses, which use the same concept of *qiwamah*, where men and women are both concerned. In the social public space, we name this the *qiwamah 'ammah* (public *qiwamah*) as we see it in two other verses, for example in Surah An-Nisa (4:135) and Surah Al-Ma'idah when God says, "*Kunu qawwamin bilqisti*" "stand up firmly for justice" (5:8). In both verses, men and women are ordered to be in charge of, and stand up for justice. So, we have the same concept of (*qiwamah qawamun*) in this verse, and with this holistic reading; *qiwamah* in verse 34, it can absolutely not be read as male superiority but as a responsibility to do justice, even in the case of providing [for their] wives.

There is another forgotten verse which is for me completely egalitarian. It is a verse about *wilayah*: "*al mu'minun wal mu'minat ba'dhum awliya' ba'din, ya'murun bil ma'ruf wanhawna 'ani al munkar*" (the believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong 9:71). This is a Qur'anic injunction for an egalitarian participation from men and women in social and political life. This is about a social partnership and political action in support for the common good (*ma'aruf*) for men and women. Unfortunately, we don't find this reading in the classical tafsir. Thank you.

Sarah

Thank you Asma. Thank you for reminding us first how fundamental it is to find balance between heart and reason, and how your relationship is constantly seeking this harmony between the *qalb* (heart) and the *aq'l* (reason). But also that in doing so, when you face challenging verses like the verse 4:34 on *qiwamah*, there are ways to uncover this ethical intent and you showed it very well, one that is seeking justice.

Mulki, could please share with us how is this experience of reading the Qur'anic text is unfolding for you?

Mulki

For me, again, there is an experiential spiritual dimension to it, as well as an intellectual. If I start with the experiential one, this is a book and revelation that I grew up with. I first started studying

it, memorizing it before I even went to school; not all of it but some of it. That was when I was very little, before I moved to Egypt where I grew up, and I remember, and this is a lifetime ago so those of you who are young will not relate to this, or maybe. I remember we had a tablet, and we used to write the Qur'an on it with charcoal. This was in Mogadishu, Somalia, and I was very proud of my tablet, and then when I moved to Egypt, I studied it there. I love its musicality, I love listening to it.

I see it as a source of ethics. I relate very much to the message of the Quran, what it teaches us ethically. So when we are facing a difficult issue, my sisters and I, we will remind each other "*wal kathimin al ghayth*" (who restrain anger) "*wal 'afin 'ani nass*" (and who pardon the people), "*wallahu yuhibu al muhsinin*" (and Allah loves the doers of good) 3:134. You know, those who hold their anger, those who do good and beautiful... I have in my office the verse that says "*khayra az adi taqwa*" (the best provision, the best food, the best sustenance is taqwa - God presence, God consciousness 2:197). "*Ala bi thikri lah tatma'inu al qulub*" (With God's remembrance, with God's words, the heart is comforted 13:28)

I also like Surah al-Luqman where it teaches us not to be arrogant, not to walk on this earth being arrogant and full of ourselves, but to be self-reflective. I like how God describes the ulama (those who seek knowledge) as those who have humility. I really relate to the Book as a source of ethics, but it's not static [relationship] by any means. Sometimes when I listen to it, I feel it's really speaking to me. And other times, I'm not so open and I struggle with it.

Now the intellectual part of it is very, very important. I really appreciate that I'm studying it, I get to teach it with other scholars, I get to learn about it from non-Muslim and Muslim scholars, and that's very helpful for me so when I read knowledge about the Qur'an and then go back to the Qur'an it's really helpful.

I want to note a group of women scholars that have been for me very, very influential in how I read the Qur'an and learn it. So when I read amina wadud's work and the concept of tawhid and I go back to the Qur'an, it really gives me more insight to read the Qur'an. When I read Sa'adiyya Shaikh's work about sufism and I go back to the Qur'an, it makes a difference. Same with Omaima and Asma's work also, with Nevin Reda and the work on the structure of the Qur'an and what that teaches us about how to read the Qur'an, and arrive at its meaning. The Egyptian scholar Amani Saleh who has interesting and very insightful knowledge about the Qur'an. So that intellectual aspect of it, also that knowledge produced about the Qur'an, is really helpful, particularly knowledge produced by these women scholars.

Sarah

Thank you very much Mulki. You have a beautiful love relationship with the Qur'an and like all the love relationships, it's not static; it needs nurturing. It's a never-ending process of seeking and understanding. It's also important to recognize that..

Mulki

Sarah, can I add something, sorry that I forgot ya...

Ya, so because of the challenging ones, the usual ones that Omaima and Asma related to you, but the ones that often I find challenging is the ones about the rituals, and they are addressed to men such as "*law lamastum an-nisa*" (contacted/touched women 4:43). You know? So, "go do this and this and that."

And I said, "Well I'm the addressee also. These verses about the rituals and teachings are also addressed to me. What about that?" And of course, as we know, this is a question that was raised even by early Muslim women and one of the Prophet's wives, Ummu Salamah. So these are some of the verses that get me to think also. Go ahead.

Sarah

And when you face these challenging verses, Mulki, what is your way out?

Mulki

It's really helping that I'm reading it ethically, that I'm doing this kind of work, that I have the space to reflect, to think, not to shy away from the challenging questions. Not to be apologetic, to be rigorous, to hear each other, and Omaima and Asma will tell you we have a lot of discussions about this. Really reading it holistically helps, and something that Asma Barlas wrote, I found it very helpful is the idea that.. to search for...the Qur'an has multiple meanings. She calls it the polysemic. These multiple meanings are very important to recognise but at the same time it doesn't mean it's relative and all meanings are the same, you know? So I'm now more invested in the process itself, rather than being invested in this one correct meaning.

Sarah

Thank you Mulki. It is very important to recognise that this process of searching for meaning, it's important. A meaning that does justice to our understanding of what God is about, a meaning that is just, and that is compassionate.

This year we are experiencing a very special Ramadhan. The health crisis is shattering our lives and creating many anxieties about the future and meaning of life. We are reminded of how fragile life can be while at the same time becoming increasingly aware of the existing structural inequalities and injustices.

Omaima, what does the Qur'an teach us to guide us through hardship?

Omaima

The Qur'an and we have been saying, acknowledges human weakness, acknowledges human fear and anxiety. So that's a signal to us that it's okay to feel that kind of anxiety, that fear of illness, of loss. But there is also the path for healing, the path to seek God as a refuge and to seek the Qur'an as a refuge to try to struggle with these feelings of anxiety. You know the Qur'anic expression of "*sharh al sadr*", "*allahuma shrah li sadri*" or "*alam nashrah laka sadrak*" (Did We not expand for you, [O Muhammad], your breast? 94:1) it's a very beautiful expression

for expansion of your chest. Because when you're depressed, anxious, when you're afraid, you really feel constricted in your chest and you are looking forward for that... you may seek that kind of expansion and easing of burden and the lifting of hardship. So hardships are there.

God talks about *ibtala'* These are times of *ibtala'*, times of trials and tests. How are we going to be patient about it? How are we going to strive to lift our burden, how are we going to reflect on the meaning of suffering and hardship. The Qur'an tells us in the verse "*wa thana ahluha anahum qadirun 'alayha*" (and its people suppose that they have capability over it, 10:24) when people think they have gained mastery over existence. Maybe this is the time to think, have we really gained mastery over existence? Or have we ruined our environment? Have we abused the resources of the planet? Really, in plain terms, what did we do wrong? Humanity did many, many things wrong in general. But to also learn the common humanity of facing danger. And for the first time, when I think about this, for the first time, this is a danger that is facing all of humanity at the same time. It's not like a war here, or a flood there. It is one danger for all humanity. And everything else, subhanallah, for the past few months, have suddenly become unimportant. All aspects of life or existence on this planet have become unimportant in comparison to all of humanity seeking to be saved, to be delivered from this unseen enemy all of a sudden, right? So there are a lot of lessons from this crisis.

How do we fix it?

A lot of lessons, and *InshaAllah*, we'll be able to go past it, *InshaAllah*. Just one more thing about common humanity--the equality in this. I'm talking about...we all have been made equal in the face of this danger. To remind us of the inequality, the so many inequalities of our own making, that humanity has created. Inequalities in race, and gender and class; between nations, between North and South. This is the time to remember these kinds of inequalities that we have created.

Sarah

Thank you. Thank you Omaira, for reminding us that this crisis is a chance to think about what human beings have been doing to our planet but also to each other. It forces us to be humble, to reflect on our responsibilities, and thank you for reminding us that the Quran acknowledges our weaknesses, but at the same time it gives us the path towards healing.

Asma, how the Qur'an is reminding us of our *khalifa* mission, our shared responsibility, as human beings, to be more sensitive to our environment?

Sarah

Asma, can you hear us? We can't hear you. You have to unmute yourself. Great :)

Asma

<laughs> Sorry. I think that this Ramadhan is a... in time of this global pandemic is an exceptional thing.. you know..things from traditions, and a new approach of our understanding

of fasting. You know it can be a beautiful time to live this spiritual month as it should be. I mean, in simplicity, a sober kind of detachment from all materialism. The spiritual retreat, as the Prophet SAW did it alone, in the deep silence in the Mount of Hira'. I think [through] the world pandemic, Allah is showing us his *ayat* (signs) in the cosmos and within ourselves.

As He says "*Sanurihim ayatina fi l'afaqi wa fi anfusihim hata yatabayana lahum anahu lhaq*" "We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth" (41:53).

So maybe we should also try to have deep reflections on our modern way of life and this ecological world, because it is our first responsibility as *khalifa*. And our mission as men and women is to take care of this creation. This is the meaning of *khilafah* and *amanah*. In this special time of this global pandemic, we all know that we have failed in this mission as Muslims and as humans. Because we have not been able to read the *ayatu llah* (God's ayah) in the sky, in the earth, in the "*samawat wa l'ard*" (skies and earth), in the mountains, in our relationship with animals, with nature, with all the creation of Allah, with "*khalq Allah*".

So, it's time to return, to reconnect with what is essential in our lives and in our relationship with God and It's creation. This crisis is a special reminder from God, maybe a transcendental sign which challenges us about our excess, our failings, about our egocentrism, and arrogance towards nature, earth and so on. Because according to [the] Qur'an, breaking the harmony of the creation is an act of corruption, and the Qur'an call it *fasad*, "*alathina yufsidun fi l'ardi*" (Who cause corruption in the land and do not amend, 26:152) So we must recognise that we have done such *fasad*, breaking this natural balance of our planet.

Unfortunately, all this cosmic ecologic vision of the Qur'an is absent in most of our Islamic discourse now and our concerns today. Because we have reduced Islam from its cosmic vision to a strictly rigorist and legalist religion. We need also to recognise that we forget a very important dimension - it's the human dimension of the Qur'anic message. This crisis may be an opportunity to return to the important message of human solidarity and shared humanity "*al mushtarak al insani*" in the Qur'an. This crisis is attacking all humanity without religion or ethnic distinction, and the Qur'an is a beautiful, ethical [reminder to us of] our common humanity despite our diversity.

Sarah

Thank you Asma, for reminding us that this crisis is an *ayah* from Allah, a divine sign to challenge our human arrogance towards nature and also a lesson of humility that pushes us to reconcile ourselves with this idea of *nafs al wahida* (one soul, or one essence). To be aware of the fact that we share a common humanity.

Mulki, what is your *taddabur*, reflection on the Qur'an leading you to when you think about these times of hardship?

Mulki

Well, first of all I want to pray for those who we all as human beings lost to this pandemic. May Allah's blessing be on them and comfort their loved ones. I think these are very difficult and very trying times, but also allows us to reflect, to do *taddabur*. And a couple of things that really resonate with me from the Qur'an because of this pandemic is the Qur'an affirms very much how we come from one origin "*khalaknakum umatan wahida*" (we created you from one people) and then we are different "*khalaknakum shu'uban wa qaba'il*" (we created you peoples and tribes), we have different "*sharaee*" we have different paths. So, affirms always the commonality and the difference and both as part of this harmonious order of God.

But I think what happened now, often, difference has taken over, and there's a lot of exclusion, multiple layers of exclusion, whether it's based on gender, whether it's based on race, economics definitely - wealth, and also ideology. And I think that perhaps it behoves us, that we take these very difficult times affecting everybody, nobody is spared. This reminds us that we are all in this together - we come from one origin, but it reminds us also that we don't need to erase our differences. Difference is part of the harmonious world, universe, part of the world order, so how can we reach out to one another and share a common good, or doing *al ad'l*, which is justice, and *ihsan*, and get beyond binaries.

As Muslims stop only praying for Muslims, and reach out for everybody, and also religious people stop looking down on people who are not religious and vice versa, those who are not religious don't take that path - have the condescending approach towards those who are religious, and thing....all kinds of binaries. Could we take this opportunity, this very painful time, to see how we can cherish and learn from our difference without erasing it, but at the same time really hang on and click towards what Asma was saying, "*al mushtaraq al insani*", this earth is all for us, this universe, and the idea of equality and justice is for all of us. And the Qur'an always affirms, it's a message for reform. From the get go, it tries to reform human beings' ways of doing things, of relating to each other, and the reform particularly for those who are most vulnerable - the oppressed. So what can we learn? Can we go back to that very core Qur'anic message about how we can stand up for the vulnerable, for the oppressed, from all kinds - whether it's from an economic base, gender base, or religion base. So these are the lessons that really resonate with me because of these difficult times.

Sarah

Thank you so much Mulki. It's important to remind ourselves of how the Qur'an is coming with this reform trajectory, focusing on those who are oppressed. You're opening a number of ethical and political questions for Muslims: we need to reflect to what extent are we blinded by our privileges and unreceptive to the oppressed and marginalised groups among us, and where are we at in our collective responsibility to stand against these inequalities and injustices. So this is something to ponder on while we are moving forward.

Thank you so much Mulki, Omaima and Asma for this illuminating conversation.

Everybody on this webinar has now gotten a flavor of the empowering and healing type of reading that could be applied to the Qur'an. I want to thank all our attendees for their constructive and on-point questions. Our colleagues Suri and Alex tried to cluster them so that the speakers can answer the questions at a time.

QUESTIONS

1. I will start with Omaima, if that's alright with you, with two questions that are related. One about, your interpretations of the verse 4:34 and another question that is related to this one, what exactly is the *darajah* that men have over women in the Qur'an (the verse from Surah Al-Baqarah) and another third related question: how would you interpret the term 'beat them' *adribuhunna* in the same verse 4:34?

Thank you Sarah. The first question was about *qiwamah* or about the verse 4:34. First of all I would like to refer everyone to Musawah's book [Men in Charge?](#) In two important chapters, one by Asma Lamrabet and another one by me. The whole book of course is about *qiwamah*, but the two chapters by Asma and myself are about the Qur'anic discourse on that concept and the difference in how it was constructed as authority, as control and it is much less than that. It is simply a divine injunction at a time of women's economic disempowerment. It's a divine injunction meant for men to provide for women. It began...as an economic injunction or even caring for women. It acquired the aspects of authority, and power and control throughout the exegetical interpretive discourse. If you look... we have to give a very short answer...go read the book, go read the two chapters. *Qiwamah* is mentioned in three other verses, to mean standing up for justice. Treating women, in this verse, simply means treating women with justice. It has nothing to do with authority and control.

The *darajah* in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 228, again, of course the mainstream interpreters made that link, this is one of the very many times when they made the links between verses, but in this one they made a link between *darajah* and *qiwamah* in verse 4:34 although they are not related at all. So they (the exegetes) do exactly the opposite of what they're supposed to do. When they're not supposed to relate things, they do. But they read this *darajah* as *qiwamah* and it's not. The context of the verse itself was about divorce, was about, again, an injunction from God SWT to both men and women to not hurt each other in the process of divorce, not to lie, to be magnanimous, to be ethical. The *darajah* (the degree) comes either in the divorce - that it's the legal right (of divorce) held by men - that seems to be the general interpretation accepted. But then there is another interpretation that hasn't attracted much attention by Tabari, the first of the exegetes in the 10th Century. He interprets it as that degree, that extra degree of magnanimity, that extra degree of effort, ethical effort, that men are asked to do. So it (*darajah*) is an acquired thing, it's not an innate, extra degree of privilege that men are born with. No, this is a divine recommendation, so to speak. For men to acquire that extra degree of doing the right thing in a context when men were violent and were doing huge injustice to women in the context of divorce. Again, let's go back to the context of the verse. So there are many things to say about these

concepts or these words. You don't take one word out of the context of the verse, the passage, the surah, of the whole Qur'an and say "here it is, *darajah* or *qiwamah*." This is the thing.

The beating verse, again, many interpretations without enough time to go into it now. But there are two interpretations now, that it could mean just going away, separating from the woman, not striking. There is another interpretation that links with the *had* around *zina* (sexual misconduct) and it's not an order for husbands, but an order for the legal community. It's very hard to go through all the dimensions of this verse. I know this is a verse that is challenging for all of us, but I want everyone to be sure that it is definitely not giving the order to husbands, or the license to husbands to strike their wives. God is too compassionate. This cannot be right. This cannot be right.

Sarah

Thank you Omaima. Our colleagues in the chat are also sharing links to the relevant publications and work that our speakers are mentioning.

2. Mulki, I would like now to address two questions to you. One from our friend Hatoon who asked about Mohammad Arkoun, who has written extensively about the Qur'an and critiqued the tradition of interpretation and its lack of historicity. She says that she knows before his death, Musawah had contact and meetings with him. How did Musawah benefit or interact with what he had to say with reference to gender in the Qur'an?
3. The second question is about "*ma malakat aymanukum*" (ما ملكت أيمانكم) "what your right hand possesses" (a reference to slaves). What is your definition or your interpretation of this term, and how does this apply to our lives today?

Mulki

Thank you for the questions, and I want the panelists to also jump in. For the first question, I don't think any of us can answer that. I am familiar with Mohammad Arkoun's work of course, but I don't know his contact with Musawah and his engagements with Musawah. That was probably before my time, so I will not be able to address that unfortunately. But I think he has made a lot of contributions to Islamic reformist thought. I'm sorry Hatoon, I'm unable to address that but I'd be happy to get back to you when I find out from my other colleagues at Musawah who have insight on that.

Ma malakat aymanukum. We have studied this as part of the book chapter that Asma and Omaima and I are working on now. It's not something that we specifically focus on because we are studying the...what I mean to say is it's not the central focus of the chapter, because the focus is marriage as a theme, and how do you read the Qur'anic ethical worldview. I personally, in the work that I've done, mostly I've done legal Islam. I've worked on Islamic jurisprudence and Muslim family laws, and then I've been working with Omaima for the past five years on the Qur'anic hermeneutics with regards to the verses on divorce. What I'm going to say is in the

context of the work on this chapter that I'm doing with Omaima and Asma, and generally some ideas from me, but I definitely want to invite Asma and Omaima to jump in please, so that we can address it adequately.

I think in the context of this chapter that we're working on, this part is particularly relevant to the historical dimension of our methodology. Clearly, it addresses a particular context where you had certain kinds of sexual relationships that were sanctioned, slavery was sanctioned, but the Qur'an was ...if one reads it again holistically and intertextually and thematically, you can see that there was definitely a goal towards abolishing it and eliminating it. But it's also a good example of the historical dimension of the Qur'an. It was revealed in a context where people had slaves, and the Qur'an encourages to abolish it, but acknowledges it and regulates it. It doesn't come straight out and say no. Definitely not, and this is an example where you can deal ethically with it. And of course it's one of the issues that raises an ethical conundrum for us today. I think it brings up the issues of the literal meaning versus the ethical meaning, and the importance of that. So do you take something that literally has to apply to every context, and then we should have "*ma malakat aymanukum*" as long as we regulate it, and have an ethical framework that guides this relationship between a man and his slave, you know...is that acceptable within the Qur'anic ethics? I would venture and say definitely no. But then what do you do with that verse?

As we know in the historical traditional sources, there was also the question of this woman who during [the time of] Omar Abdul Khattab (*radiya lahu 'anhu*) who said, "OK, what about me?" She had a slave, a male slave, and "can I also have a sexual partner, my slave?" Of course, there's the ethical problems in both: having someone as your sexual partner, whom you own. So I think it raises the issue of the historical dimension of the Qur'an and then ethically, can that be a way out? OK, if you read it holistically then can we say, and I think we can and that's what we're trying to do in that chapter, that this is not ethical. This is not something that the Qur'an would sanction because there's also the universal dimension and message of the Qur'an. But it's definitely a tension that I recognize and we're not shying away from it. Omaima and Asma, please if you have insights or clarifications that you want to add to that?

Sarah

Omaima do you want to add.. any insights?

Omaima

Yes, can I add something very quickly about that? You know, slavery was there when the Qur'an descended. It has always been a part of human history when the Qur'an just was revealed. The Qur'an didn't institute it, Islam didn't institute it. It was there. *Malakat aymanukum*, we recognise it as a historical institution, just like the *jizya* (tax paid by non-Muslim populations). You know, it's okay to say there are certain things that were historical and that don't exist now anymore. But even in the verses about *malakat aymanukum*, and I know Mulki and Asma, we talked about this in our reading, even when you look deeply at these verses, the Qur'an never sanctioned illegal sexual relations with concubines. The order, if you look at the verses very

carefully, is to marry from them, as opposed to free women. There were free women and there were slaves, and the order was to marry from the slaves. Not to have illegal sexual relations with them right? Asma? This is just one detail that I wanted to throw in.

Mulki

Asma, do you have something to add to that?

Asma

You know we discussed this in our work. This is really a very historic context and we have to read it like that but the difference that Omaima said, the Qur'an intended to protect these women. This is more important. The finality, the objective, the *maqasid*, is to protect. They were the oppressed and the thing that I understood from the Qur'an is that they had the right to be married, it's not about the sexual freedom you can have "*ma malakat aymanuha*" like that, no I don't think. Because there is the framework: there is a *mithaq* (covenant), there is a *nikah* (marriage), there is *azwaj* (a pair) for them. This is all.

Mulki

I would also add that in order to follow the moral trajectory that the Qur'an sets in motion, and this is something that many modern scholars have written about, like Khaled Abou Fadl, and others - amina wadud, and Omaima and Asma, I would say that also....I would argue that it's not simply...by the Qur'an's logic, if we agree on that premise, that the Qur'an sets a moral trajectory in motion, by the Qur'an's logic itself, it's not enough to say, "Oh I can have a female slave, but I'm gonna treat her ethically and I'm going to marry her" I think we could also argue, and maybe people will disagree with us, but by the Qur'an's logic, that slavery, period, is against the Qur'an's ethics, even if you are treating your slaves ethically.

Sarah

And thank you for clarifying this, Mulki. I think it's important to clarify and be straightforward with these kinds of statements. Now I would like to address three questions to Asma.

The first is related to: How does the ethical outlook and faith-based feminism differ from the Western women's movement, and what is the place of reason in this Islamic feminist interpretation.

Another question is about the meaning of Muslim feminist and Islamic feminist. Whether you think it's important to differentiate these terms.

Finally, how do you see this work moving forward for our young people in the future?

Asma

We have to make the difference between feminism and all the feminisms: first of all, it's feminisms (plural), there is not a feminism. So when you are talking about the Western women's movement as a feminist, as one uniform bloc, I don't agree, because it's plural. So [how] does

this ethical outlook differ from the Western women's movement? I think that we share many things - we share the universal principle and there are different models. The Western feminism is one model. In Europe, in France you have many models of feminisms; in the [United] States, you know everywhere, you have a plural movement of feminists. In the Arabic world or the Muslim world, also there are many movements. We share the universal principles, that are gender equality, dignity, emancipation, freedom, the right to work, to be against all discrimination. This is very important, this is what we share. But the other thing is about strategy, about context. I [cannot] apply French or American feminism in my country, in Morocco. So, I have my context, I have my perspective as Moroccan, Muslim and Arabic woman. I have to deal with my local patriarchal system. So this is the difference, so we have something to share.

On the question of what is the place of reason in Islamic feminism. It's the big place, it's the heart of feminism and Muslim feminists, because reason is everything. I think that our quest is a quest of justice for men and women, for all the society. So this is the "reason approach". The difference between Muslim feminist and Islamic feminist, you know, personally I don't make this difference. But there are some who (and feminists) that say Muslim feminists are those who are not working on the sacred text, they are culturally Muslim and working on the universal human rights. Islamic feminism is a new movement that arose in the 80s and 90s after the Islamic revolution and are working on the sacred text. But for me I don't differentiate, because before God maybe it's the same. These principles are universal. To have faith or not to have faith is your own business, it's between you and God. The most important is the goal is the finality of the universal principle.

The second question on how I see this work moving forward in the future - I see that the young people are waiting for us to give them the answers. Because the problem with our religious institutions and our *ulama*, most of them, they don't answer them [young people]. They have no alternative for these young people. This is very problematic - and this is not about women also; many young people, men who send me mail and ask me about many things in the Qur'an. There is an absence of answers for young people. And I see that they are going, and they have this consciousness, about they are worrying that there is something monolithic in this discourse of Islam.

Mulki

Can I add something very quickly, Sarah?

Sarah

Perhaps we can let Asma finish first

Asma

Is there another question Sarah?

Sarah

No you answered all three of them.

Mulki

I second what Asma said, but I want to add that feminism, we see it as a knowledge project within this project, and if it's a knowledge project then of course, reason is very central. As for Islamic feminism, this comes from my doing research on it. What's crucial about Islamic feminists is it's a knowledge project undertaken predominantly by Muslim women that are trying to systematically do two things: deconstruct patriarchal interpretations, and reconstruct egalitarian interpretations but working from within the tradition. Hence the word "Islamic", i.e. making an argument for gender equality on Islamic grounds and bridging feminist studies and religious studies together. Adopting feminism as a theory of knowledge and as a methodology.

Sarah

Thank you very much Mulki and you're addressing some of the questions with this clarification. Because we are short on time, I will share with you one last question, and address it to all three of you: how do contemporary male scholars of the Qur'an perceive your emancipatory and alternative interpretations of the challenging verses about gender relations?

Omaima

Contemporary male scholars - how do they view this project (the Islamic feminist project) in general, right? Very few are supportive. There are some male feminists who are supportive and who are fair, and who can see the problem and see what is the intent behind this project, as Mulki explained it. Unfortunately, the majority do not understand. There are many accusations against this project and the hostility also comes specifically from religious institutions. Any institution is about power and authority, and it has been monopolised throughout the decades by males...these are male institutions, right? They're about power and authority, and authority of knowledge, so they do not look favorably upon our efforts. There are accusations of adopting a Western liberal agenda, I don't know why, just because we speak about justice and equality that are the core message, as we have been explaining and talking about, of the Qur'an. Justice, equality and beauty and ethics are not a monopoly of the West. And another accusation is that we are not specialists. But really, the accusation of not being specialists is that "you don't have the power, and we will not allow you to have the power (the power of knowledge)." In terms of not being specialists, I'm not being modest, but we are learning. We all read and we all learn, and we all study, so we are making ourselves, InshaAllah, with the help of God, specialised in what we read. We read and we study, and take this very seriously. We engage the tradition as much as Muslims. We are not just parachuting the Qur'an or on this knowledge. The problem is power and authority.

Sarah

Thank you, Omaima. Asma or Mulki, do you want to add?

Mulki

Yes, I would like to add but first Asma.

Asma

Go ahead, Mulki

Mulki

Ya, I would say we want to recognize male scholars who are very supportive - there are a few, but very [supportive]. We have the privilege of collaborating with a number of them in the projects that we've been working on. You know, there's Mohsen Kadivar, a scholar at Duke University from Iran; there's Shadaab Rahemtullah from University of Edinburgh; but Omaima is absolutely right - they are few. We are kind of like a misfit, not only vis-a-vis male scholars. I would say misfit because as Omaima said, traditional religious scholars say you are not specialists and "You are doing gender and this is from the West". Some people who are very skeptical of engaging with religion seriously and positively, but critically and rigorously also question this. Also in Islamic studies if you do gender, this is seen as "Oh, this is just an activist project, it's not really knowledge, it's not really intellectual", whereas I see this really as bringing up very important questions for everybody even if you're not working on gender. Questions of authority, of hermeneutics, questions of ethics, you know. It's kind of like we are a misfit but perhaps being a misfit is a good thing because it allows us to be always self reflective, to be humble, to keep doing the work very rigorously and I think, one thing that I am really grateful for is that these colleagues that we work with, we share general goals but also we allow ourselves the space to be different and we are different, and perhaps, if you get to see when we work together, we have some differences and we air these differences and learn from them. We are not just a choir singing the same song as they say. Asma your turn.

Sarah Thank you Mulki

Asma: Can I say something, hello?

Sarah: Yes, please. We can hear you.

Asma: I totally agree with what Mulki and Omaima said, and I want to say that there is a difference between the Western context, and our context, the Arabic, Muslim context. Because as Omaima said, our scholars are in general, against our work, we have to be very clear. I just have to recognise that there are a few here, for example in Morocco, young scholars, not traditionalist scholars, who are supporting our work. But you know, some traditional scholars are very virulent (against us) because there is a fear of what is emancipation, of the concept of women emancipation. There is a big fear of changing the roles, the norms, changing the traditions, as Omaima said, they don't read our work, they just see the titles, 'feminist', 'modern', 'gender equality', and it's enough for them to say that it's against Islam. The second thing is that there is a denial to the reality, they don't know the reality of women, of young people, of our sociological context, so they don't know what's happening, they're just closed in their citadel, I don't know how you say that, in their books of classical tafsir, and they don't want anything to change. Because change is for them is a danger, is very dangerous for them. What I want to

also say, is, as Omaima said, it's about power. And they are very afraid to lose that power. This is classical in the whole history of the Islamic civilisation - but I still believe that we are a minority, but we are a strong minority and insha'Allah we will succeed. You know why? Because we truly are sincere, we are believing in a very important and ethical concept in the Qur'an, we are believing in the justice of Allah. Thank you

Sarah: Thank you so much Asma and what a beautiful way to close our webinar with this idea of power, and thank you for empowering us in reclaiming these spaces with your work and precious insights.

We apologise because there were so many questions that we did not have time to answer, but you can see in the ppt, in the last slide, my email, so please feel free to send us your further questions.

We would like to close this webinar with a du'a. It was very important for us to close a session on spiritual care with a prayer. The du'a was developed by all four of us, and it's inspired by Qur'anic verses, it's in Arabic but you will be able to find the English translation in the powerpoint. And I have been designated to read the du'a

In the name of God, most Merciful, most Compassionate, the Gentle, the Clement, the Near, the All-Hearing, the Responsive Who answers the prayers. O Allah, make us among the people who seek to understand, who ponder over your signs, in your books, in your universe and in ourselves. O Allah, make us among the God-conscious (people), those who act justly, who forgive, the doers of goodness and beauty. O Allah grant us inner discernment, patience and love of goodness. O Allah, the most Merciful of the merciful ones, deliver us and the entire humankind from this pandemic and calamity, and grant us from Your mercy. Indeed, You are the Bestower. Our God, upon You we rely, and to You we turn and with You is the final abode. Our God, do not impose blame upon us if we have forgotten or erred. Our God, and lay not upon us a burden like that which You laid upon those before us. Our God, and burden us not with that which we have no ability to bear. And pardon us; and forgive us; and have mercy upon us. Exalted are You, the Lord of might, above what they describe. And peace upon the messengers. And praise to Allah, Lord of the worlds.

Thank you everyone. Thank you so much for your time and for your questions. Thank you again, Mulki, Omaima and Asma for your illuminating interventions and responses. Before you leave can you all please respond to a poll – it's short, only 2 questions, and it's important for us to

have your feedback. We will post a recap and a video of this webinar to the Musawah website, plus the resources mentioned by the speakers, so that you can share it with your friends and relatives and send us your feedback.

May God fill your hearts with light, and may we all remember to be kind to each other during these very difficult times. Thank you also to Suri and Alex and all our colleagues in Musawah for making this possible. Keep in touch with us through our Facebook page, through our website and we will be more than happy to share with you our work. Asalamu 'alaikum.