



CHAPTER 11

Women Were Not Meant to Be Subordinate to Men

Having recounted how men and women were created from the same ingredients using the same process, and having declared repeatedly that every man and every woman will be judged individually and by the same measure for their decisions in life, the Qur'an does not leave the matter there. It proceeds to spell out what this essential sameness means on a practical level, in terms of **human beings' foremost role: as God's vice-roys (*khalifas*, aka caliphs) on earth** (2:30, 6:165, 10:14, 27:62, 43:60, among others).

GUARDIANSHIP: THE QUR'AN DEFINES WOMEN AND MEN AS MUTUAL PROTECTORS (*WALIS*)

Repentance, 9:71

And believing men and believing women are each other's protectors/guardians...

The notion that men are *literal* guardians of women, in the way an adult may be the guardian of a minor, clearly does not come from the Qur'an, where **women and men are equally empowered as *mutual benefactors*** as this verse shows. Yet some nonetheless claim that the Qur'an instructs men to be the all-empowered guardians of women and in a handful of societies this view has even been turned into law, whereby a

father (or in his absence, an uncle or brother) wields the power to grant or prevent a woman's education, marriage, divorce, work, or indeed travel outside the country or in extreme cases, even outside the home. Typically in this patriarchal view the role of guardian is transferred to the husband once a woman marries.

This is an extraordinary view to adopt as **it strips a woman of the means of serving God as His viceroy on earth**, a role for which men and women will be evaluated individually according to the Qur'an. **It moreover strips her of her God-given dignity, having been created from the soul of Adam and by extension, from the divine breath**, as already shown in Part II.

It is also extraordinary because the very *hadith* compilations discussed at length in Part I contain ample evidence of Muhammad having counted on his wives in major political and other decisions, even deferring to them at times—hardly the behaviour of an all-knowing “guardian” dictating every move of his “wards”. For example it is reported that his first wife **Khadija**, who was 15 years his senior and his sole spouse for 25 years until her death, was consulted and deferred to on many occasions; and that one of his later wives **Umm Salama** helped defuse a tense situation when consulted by the Prophet about the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, when his followers who had marched with him from Medina initially resisted his orders around deferring the pilgrimage for one year as part of a peaceful settlement with the Meccan enemy.¹ Mutual protectors, indeed.

Nor does the harm stop there, at the spiritual level. If a man is thought of as the guardian of his wife, then by extension he becomes the *sole* guardian of his children, especially when a couple divorces. Upon divorce, it becomes an uphill if not impossible battle for a woman to retain custody of her children or even see them at times, no matter how young they are. Though a general rule adopted by most religious authorities is that the **children of divorced parents** must remain with their mother until puberty, a web of cultural and economic levers afforded men in patriarchal societies has ensured that this is the case only when an accommodating man is involved. As to why the traditional view in some places has, at least nominally, drawn the line at puberty, I believe it relates to the medieval norm whereby one became eligible for marriage at puberty, combined with the patriarchal norm whereby one's marriage prospects improved if the figure of a father was involved in the negotiations—as the all-empowered “guardian”, naturally, in the case of a daughter in particular.

¹Abou El Fadl, Khaled M. 2003. *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 229 and 254.

PARTICIPATION: WOMEN AND MEN ARE JOINTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR SHAPING SOCIETY

So often with religion, we get sucked into specific and narrow questions about this or that, questions that often feel like a barrage of arrows shot from every direction by the well-meaning and less-so alike. It can be overwhelming for those who love their religion. We instinctively dodge this one, argue against that one, distance ourselves from yet another, and generally get worked up and defensive. I would like to suggest that instead, we try to make sure that the right question is asked and answered *first*.

The right question, to my mind, when it comes to women's full participation in society, is surely the following:

What does the Qur'an tell us is God's *purpose* in creating human beings and placing them on earth?

First, the Qur'an tells us, over and over again, that we human beings are **God's viceroys** or deputies on earth. An example:

The Confederates, 33:72

We offered this Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were wary of it—yet humankind bore it: (but) it proved to be a foolish sinner.

Second, the Qur'an offers its followers a **core job description**, as it were, for the position of viceroys, to help us get it right:

Repentance, 9:71

And believing men and believing women are each other's protectors: they command with² kindness [i.e. *bil-maarooif*] and abstain³ from the abominable, perform the prayer, give the alms, and obey God and His Messenger...

² Other translations of 9:71 include phrases such as "...enjoin what is right/just and forbid what is wrong/evil...", or "...bid to honour and forbid dishonour..." and so on. Firstly, rather than directing *others* to do what is kind and forbidding *others* from the distasteful, the Arabic can be heard to mean behaving with kindness and abstaining from the distasteful *ourselves* (such as in 24:21, where there can be no doubt of this phrase's reflexive meaning), which in fact makes more sense since the rest of the verse lists other things one can only do oneself, such as perform the prayers and give the alms, etc. Secondly, while "right" and "wrong" etc. are all good enough meanings, the Qur'anic Arabic here is in fact more specific than that: the actual words used are "kindness" (*maarooif*, whose root meaning points to "what is known or recognised as such") and the "abominable" (*munkar*, whose root meaning is "senseless"), clearly referring to what is gentle versus what is extremely distasteful, respectively.

³ See the above footnote.

(notice that in the above God clearly expects women and not only men to command or lead), and

The Spoils, 8:53

...God would never alter a grace He has bestowed upon a people unless they have first altered what is in their souls [i.e. hearts]; for God is all-Hearing, all-Knowing.

Thunder, 13:11

...God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in their souls [i.e. hearts]...

Third, the Qur'an speaks of our **compensation**, so to speak, if we serve as good viceroys. Many such verses have already been cited in Part II, but here are just a few of the many others for variety, and to underscore how **the Qur'an never tires of emphasising, over and over again, that all it is laying out applies to men and women equally and individually:**

Women, 4:124

Whoever does a good deed, whether male or female, and is a believer—those shall enter the Garden, and they shall not be wronged (the equivalent of) so much as a dent in a date-stone.

Repentance, 9:72

God has promised believing men and believing women gardens under which rivers flow—where they shall be immortal—and blessed dwellings in the Gardens of Eden. But God's goodly acceptance is greater by far—that is the mighty triumph!

Iron, 57:18

Men who give in charity and women who give in charity, and who (therefore) lend God a goodly loan—it shall be multiplied for them (in return), and theirs shall be a generous wage.

To summarise, **the Qur'an basically gives its followers a road-map.** If we:

- **spread kindness** and **eschew the morally distasteful**;
- **worship** God, and give in **charity**;

- **obey God** and His Messenger (Muhammad), and
- work on the contents of our hearts, or **inner selves**

then **we shall reap what we sow whether in this world or the next**, as no good deed goes unnoticed by God.

Now that we have answered the right question first through the lens of the Qur'an itself, surely—*surely*—there is no need to pick at this or that aspect of a woman's life, be it her education, marriage, work, appearance or anything else. One cannot possibly, neither religiously nor rationally, make the case that women can be prevented from full decision-making in their lives or full participation in the world around them. **To prevent women from full engagement in the world is, quite simply, to disobey the Qur'anic God.**

- **Education**

In the Qur'an, stretching the human mind to its fullest potential is so important a virtue that **the word *'ilm*—literally meaning both knowledge and science—is mentioned in its various derivatives no less than 854 times.**⁴ Knowledge/science (*'ilm*) implies effort, search, and inquiry and is different from plain knowledge (*ma'rifah*), which means “having information or awareness” and is somewhat more static. It is unsurprising then that the sciences flourished in Muslim lands during the first eight centuries after the Qur'anic revelation, and that **Muslim societies have never found there to be a conflict between religion and science, always regarding the pursuit of science as a means of better understanding and therefore glorifying God's omnipotence and creativity.**

The word *'ilm* is also the Arabic word for learning, or education.

In the *hadith* compilations, likewise, we find memorable sayings and stories about the importance of pursuing *'ilm* that reflect the Prophet's understanding of education's central role in the new religion he was founding:

⁴Lang, Jeffrey. 1995. *Struggling to Surrender: Some Impressions from an American Convert to Islam*. Maryland: Amana Publications, 176.

Seeking knowledge/science/education is an obligation for every Muslim.⁵

It is also narrated that the Prophet once declared that all prisoners of battle who could read and write and were willing to teach his followers how to read and write would be set free with no strings attached, whether they were freepersons or bondpersons, i.e. slaves.⁶ And it is reported that when Muhammad learnt of a woman in Medina who could read and write, he soon asked her to teach his wife Hafsa to do so.⁷

A fringe but notorious few today in a couple of countries argue that only scriptural knowledge is legitimate while all else is heretical. In this view all other subjects, whether the humanities or sciences, are a dangerous distraction. This view fails to grasp that to better understand God's message, every ounce of our intellectual capacity needs to be exercised to the best of our abilities, and not just our minimal powers of reading, memorising, and unreflective movements and utterances during ritual prayer. This view also misses the point of our existence, namely to participate constructively in life on earth as God's viceroys and in accordance with the profound roadmap provided by the Qur'an itself, as outlined above.

"God, grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things," prayed the Prophet.⁸

⁵ Ibn Abdel Barr, Al-Hafedh. Sahih Jami' Bayan al-Ilm wa Fadlihi as compiled by Al-Zuhairy (in Arabic). Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, 8; and www.nabulsi.com/web/article/3791.

⁶ For example see Al-Batyawi, Aziz. 1981. Sunan al-Umran al-Bashari fi al-Sira al-Nabawiyya (in Arabic). Amman: Al-Ma'had al-'Alami lil-fikr al-Islam, 524; and Al-Albani, Muhammad. 1400H. Al-Ajwiba al-Nafi'a 'an As'ilat Lajnat Masjid al-Jami'a (in Arabic). Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islami, 47. Referenced on www.dorar.net—(both in Arabic).

⁷ Rida, Muhammad Rashid. 1404H. Huquq al-Nisa' fil-Islam (in Arabic). Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islami,

17. Referenced on www.dorar.net. The female teacher in question was none other than Layla or Al-Shifa' (i.e. The Cure), who was later placed in charge of running the *souks*, or commercial marketplaces, by the caliph Omar—see Chap. 8, footnote 25.

⁸ Hassan, Riffat. 2000. Human Rights in the Qur'anic Perspective. In Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America, ed. Gisela Webb, 246. New York: Syracuse University Press.

- **Work**

If women are to participate fully in the world as God’s viceroys by following the Qur’anic roadmap to divine representation and ultimate salvation, then it goes without saying that they are likely to engage in work of some sort at some point. I can almost hear a proud or otherwise resistant male voice somewhere in the world pushing back at this to say “not necessarily—if it’s about doing good, a woman can always volunteer at a charity”, which raises the question as to why it would bother anyone that a woman be paid for her efforts. It certainly did not bother the God of the Qur’an, who in fact deemed it only fair that women be paid for their contributions, and actually had strong words to say about it:

Women, 4:32

And do not covet what God has favoured some of you with over [i.e. at the expense of] others: for men is a share for what they have earned, and for women is a share for what they have earned. But ask God of His bounty, for God is the Knower of all things.

Stunningly, this verse was apparently revealed as a reprimand after men objected to the Qur’an granting women the right to inheritance, something utterly revolutionary at the time.⁹ The verse makes reference to men and women both having *earned* a right to inheritance **by recognising women’s in-kind contribution to society as work** after some women had lobbied for it to be so, which meant that they would henceforth also be able to inherit.¹⁰ More will be said about the circumstances of this extraordinary verse in the next section entitled “Activism”, but it must be mentioned here that the most repeated explanation for this verse has unfortunately been the exact opposite: we are told that God was reprimanding *women*, not men, for *their* objection to inheriting less than men, an issue I hope to address under Chap. 12, entitled Inheritance. I cannot begin to imagine women in seventh-century Arabia arguing for *more* inheritance when winning the right to inheritance at all must have surely been a seismic coup given what we know of the attitudes of the time and place. But I can easily imagine men objecting to this new arrangement, as

⁹ About El Fadl, Khaled M. 2007. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. New York: HarperOne, 265–266.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

it is unequivocally recorded they actually did,¹¹ as from their perspective it meant a sudden loss of stature and wealth in favour of what had always been seen as a secondary class in their society.

Lastly, if women and men are mandated by God to pursue knowledge, science and education as we have already seen, surely it would be the height of selfishness for women to then keep all these treasures to themselves rather than put all they have learnt to good work, literally, for the benefit of their societies.

- **Activism**

I have often reflected on the verses that tell us that God does not change the condition of a people, to the better or worse, until or unless they have first changed what is in their hearts (8:53 and 13:11 shown above). Do we ever think about that as we consider the challenges we face in our societies and our world, before we translate our feelings into action? Perhaps we would choose more constructive and effective action if we internalised this higher notion of self-help a bit more.

Probably inspired and emboldened by the Qur’anic emphasis on fairness, women during Muhammad’s time were inclined to act—by taking their grievances directly to the Prophet. But it was God Himself who often responded to their activism, which reminds me of the English saying, “Heaven helps those who help themselves.”

- Thus when a group of women in seventh-century Medina felt that not only men but women also should inherit and took their case to the Prophet, **the Qur’an responded to their demand with revolutionary verses that established women as heiresses for the first time**—within an entirely new system of inheritance (4:7, 4:11, 4:12, 4:32, 4:33, 4:34, 4:176, 2:240). In tribal Arabia at the time only men who fought in battle were entitled to inheritance, and though some women were now also fighting at times, the men felt that this was a voluntary act on their part that no one expected or demanded of them, so nothing should change. When the women decided to petition the Prophet, they argued that even when they did not actually fight they contributed in a variety of critical ways to

¹¹ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (editor-in-chief) et al. 2015. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 193.

the wellbeing of the community that put men in a better position to fight. The Prophet told the women he did not have an immediate answer for them, and shortly afterwards the Qur'an addressed the women's concern by granting all women the right to inherit within a revamped system.¹²

- And when a woman named Khawla, whose husband had forsworn sexual relations with her in a fit of anger, pleaded most eloquently with the Prophet to find her and her husband a way out of necessarily keeping the oath, per custom, and ending the marriage (which neither wanted), **the Qur'an responded with a direct acknowledgement of Khawla's distress in a chapter named after her petition, and proceeded to ban the unfair custom and impose penalties on husbands who committed it.** For this was a practice that often left a wife stuck in a loveless marriage without the ability to move on and re-marry,¹³ unlike her husband who could always take a second wife under certain conditions (polygyny will be discussed further down):

The Woman who Disputes, 58:1–58:4

God has heard the words of she who disputes with you (Muhammad) regarding her husband, she who complains to God. God hears the conversation between the two of you, for God is all-Hearing, all-Seeing.

Nor did Khawla's activism stop there:

She then counters every penalty the verses impose on the man guilty of *zihar* [the forswearing custom in question] with a convincing reason for excusing Aws [Khawla's husband] from it: He is too feeble to fast two months and too impoverished to feed dates to sixty poor people. Finally, the Prophet offers to donate half the dates. Khawla chips in with the other half, and between the two of them they get the sorry old fellow off the hook. Aws is reported to have said, 'But for Khawla, I would have been done for.'¹⁴

¹²Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Op. Cit.* (2007), 265.

¹³Kahf, Mohja. 2000. Braiding the Stories: Women's Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era. In *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb, 155–156. New York: Syracuse University Press.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 157.

- Finally, it is well worth repeating that when women questioned the Qur’anic usage of the generic masculine plural, **the Qur’an responded with the famous verse reiterating the distinct masculine and feminine plurals side by side** in some detail:

The Confederates, 33:35

For submitting men (to God) and submitting women, believing men and believing women, devout men and devout women, truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, chaste men and chaste women, men who remember God often and women who remember God often—for them God has prepared forgiveness, and a great reward.

These Qur’anic verses that were revealed in response to proactive women’s concerns show an intimate and moving degree of responsiveness and attention by God. There was no admonishment of these women for demanding formal entitlement, no upbraiding them for upending custom, no reprimand even for questioning Qur’anic formulations. **This is a very different picture of God from what some would have us believe** these days. Perhaps God looked into the petitioning women’s hearts and liked what He saw. Perhaps God wanted to show us that things only change for the better when we strive to make them so through constructive means, or that all customs are open to debate. Indeed as a renowned expert and educator has put it:

The thorough and fair-minded researcher will observe that behind every single Qur’anic revelation regarding women was an effort seeking to protect women from exploitative situations and from situations in which they are treated inequitably. In studying the Qur’an it becomes clear that the Qur’an is educating Muslims on how to make incremental but lasting improvements in the condition of women that can only be described as progressive for their time and place.¹⁵

One cannot but wonder what other topics the Qur’an might have addressed, that are not already covered by the holy book, if someone had posed the question at the time—whether man or woman.

¹⁵Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Op. Cit.* (2007), 262.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE OF WOMEN'S FULL PARTICIPATION

If we know the circumstances and context of the above verses, it is because they have come to us through the *hadith* compilations which, it must be remembered, also hold many accurate reflections of the Prophet's words and deeds. But positive *hadith* relating to women is not the kind that society has chosen to promote or educate us on, and 99.99% of us are probably unaware of the correlation between women's activism and the revelation of certain verses, such as the one that resulted in an overhaul of inheritance customs and the one that removed all doubt regarding the inclusion of women in all aspects of God's vision for humanity. I had no idea whatsoever myself, until one book led to another in a long chain over a period of many years. We must change that and make this common knowledge.

And there is a lot more in *hadith* that underscores quite how thoroughly engaged women were during Muhammad's reign as the deliverer of the Qur'an, as the prophet of Islam. But again, they are stories that we are not told.

Women would meet individually and privately with the Prophet to consult on matters of concern; as a group, women in Medina demanded to meet with him in weekly sessions dedicated just to them; women insisted on the right to join military campaigns, attend prayers in the mosque, and grant assurances of safe conduct to the enemy, all against apparent opposition from men.¹⁶

The Prophet reportedly raced one of his wives (Aisha) in public; women would watch sports in Medina; **men and women visited one another and exchanged gifts; and women would come up to Muhammad in the street and take him by the hand**, sit with him, chat with him.¹⁷

And we already know from earlier on in this book of specific women's participation as leaders of various sorts: Aisha, the religious and political leader; Nusayba, Asma bint Yazid and Umm Fadl, the valiant warriors or occasional fighters; and Umm Waraqa, the would-be warrior assigned by the Prophet to serve as *imam* or prayer leader instead.

We also learn interesting snippets from various historical records from the first eight centuries after the Prophet's death: that some of the greatest scholars would issue religious opinions (*fatwas*) with their learned wives'

¹⁶Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Op. Cit.* (2003), 230.

¹⁷Ibid., 239.

or daughters' signatures attached in approval; and that the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence had concluded from the outset in the eighth century that women did not need a male guardian's permission to marry.¹⁸ And as already mentioned, one learned woman known as Al-Shifa' (i.e. The Cure) was even appointed by the caliph Omar as minister of trade and commerce, effectively, in charge of running the *souks*, or commercial marketplaces.¹⁹

THE ALLEGED PUSHBACK OF THE QUR'AN
ON GUARDIANSHIP AND PARTICIPATION: BUT VERSES 4:34
AND 2:228 SAY MEN ARE SUPERIOR AND THEREFORE
IN CHARGE!

This is the first of several mentions that will be made of verse 4:34, a long verse which consists of several sentences that have been seized upon to argue that the Qur'an itself calls for the subordination of women to men (and more), never mind all the other verses scattered throughout the holy book to the contrary. **Importantly, this verse comes immediately after two verses that speak of *all men and women now having the right to inherit in varying degrees, so bearing this in mind is crucial.*** Its first half says the following:

✓ Women, 4:34

Men are upholders/maintainers (*qawwamūn*) of women with whatever God has favoured some [i.e. men] with over others [*i.e. other men*], and with whatever they spend of their wealth [i.e. on the women]. Therefore righteous women are devoutly pious (*qanītāt*), keeping private what God has ordained be so-kept...

This first half of the above is utterly unsurprising if one is paying attention to the flow of verses within the Qur'anic chapters—a theme we now come back to—and given the historical context. Here are some observations:

¹⁸Brown, Jonathan. 2015. *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*. London: Oneworld Publications, 198–199.

¹⁹See footnote 7 and also Al-Baleek, Imad. 2017. Meet the First Female Minister of Commerce in Islam (in Arabic). Al Arabiya news website www.alarabiya.net, October 19.

- Firstly, seventh-century Arabia, like most other societies then and now, was a society where men were the breadwinners who supported their families. So for the Qur'an to speak of men as the financial supporters of women is natural.
- About two dozen verses earlier in the same chapter, several verses (4:7, 4:11–12) had laid out the pillars of the division of inheritance.
- The two verses just before this one (4:32–33) come back to the question of inheritance allocations, specifically mentioning the fact that women as well as men would now indeed inherit—for *what they have earned*.
- And now the Qur'an pulls it all together: in this first part of 4:34, it takes what was the de facto custom of men supporting women and turns it into a man's *obligation*, so **although women would also now be eligible for inheritance, men would have a duty henceforth to support women**. Notice that the reference in 4:34 is to men and women generally not just to husbands and wives, with an implied and indeed socially accepted obligation in Muslim societies also towards sisters, mothers, and so on. Thus in 4:34, God converts a de facto custom into a de jure one, moving from description to prescription.

But most translations and indeed interpretations in Arabic of the first half of 4:34 have unfortunately conveyed a different meaning, rupturing it in no less than six different places:

× Men are guardians/in charge of women because God has preferred the one (men) over the other (women), and because they spend of their wealth [on the women]; therefore righteous women are obedient, guarding in (their husbands') absence what God would guard...

The completely different meaning that this version transmits speaks for itself but for the benefit of those who will ask “how can this be?”, here are a few facts that should be helpful:

- Several Arabic-speaking contemporary scholars have pointed out the error of translating *qawwamūn* as guardians/protectors rather than upholders/maintainers, not least given the context supplied by the rest of the sentence regarding financial support.

Moreover the same word is used elsewhere in the Qur'an both in the singular form, in reference to God upholding justice (3:18), and in the plural later in the same chapter, when the Qur'an speaks of human beings upholding justice:

Women, 4:135

Oh you who believe: Be upholders/maintainers (*qawwamīn*) of justice, witnesses for God even if it be against yourselves, or your parents and relatives, whether it be (a case of) someone rich or poor—for they both belong to God. So do not follow whims, lest you be unjust...

- As several scholars have pointed out, “to favour someone with more of something” is not to “prefer them”, or in some translations “to cause them to excel”, but simply to allocate to them more of something—more inheritance and wealth, in this case;²⁰ in fact besides 4:32 and 4:34 already discussed, another verse later on uses the same turn of phrase in a material context and not related to gender at all: “And God has favoured some of you over others in provision...” (16:71)
- Though it is clear in this verse that God is saying to men (not just husbands) that whether God favours them with plenty or little they must support women to the extent that their wealth (including inheritance) permits, interpretations that point out the above two biases still go along with the conventional view that the comparison here is between the inheritance God grants *any man* above and beyond what He grants *any woman*. **But this is utterly illogical in my view as not every man will inherit or have more wealth than every woman**, this being a function of the personal and family circumstances of each person. For instance with regard to inheritance alone and assuming the same total value of the two estates: if a woman dies leaving behind a husband and a daughter, the husband would get only 25% of her inheritance whereas her daughter would get 50% (with the balance going to other relatives as may exist); or if

²⁰ al-Hibri, Azizah. 2000. An Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights. In *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb, 63–64. New York: Syracuse University; Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Op. Cit.* (2007), 267; among others.

- a man dies leaving behind a wife, mother, father and sister, the father would inherit less than each of the three women, specifically only 8%.
- Arabic-speaking scholars have also pointed out the misleading use of “because” in this verse, since the original word *bima* literally means “via” and so is better rendered here as “with whatever” or “to the extent that” or “in accordance with”, though per the previous point made they often still relate that to the idea that every man receives more inheritance than every woman and *therefore* must financially support them.²¹ I do not disagree with this principle, but I do believe the intent *here* was to say to each man that he must support the women of his family to the extent that he is able, or in accordance with what God has favoured him with (“Men are upholders of women with whatever God has favoured some (men) with over others”, i.e. relative to other men).
 - Most shockingly, a good Arabic speaker can readily point out that the word *qanitāt* means “devoutly pious” or voluntarily submitting *to God*, so to translate it as “obedient” in this context especially leaves many thinking that the Qur’an is demanding that women obey *men*²²...*because God has preferred men over women*, to boot! A number of translations even insert mention of husbands in parentheses as shown above, which only exacerbates the problem, even though in some cases it is in fact unintentional: it results from understanding the phrase “keeping private” to mean (rather awkwardly) “guarding in absence”, which then begs the question of *in whose absence*—hence the introduction of the husbands in parentheses as part of the translation. Whereas **having made it a duty for men to financially support women despite women now being able to inherit in their own right, the Qur’an is actually articulating God’s expectation that righteous women be devout and do as God bids them, i.e. to be faithful to their husbands.**

It is not difficult to see how one can jump from an erroneous interpretation like this one of 4:34’s first sentences to insisting that men are literal

²¹ Ibid.

²² Several scholars have pointed out the error of interpreting *qanitāt* as obedience to fellow humans rather than God. See some of the scholars cited in Barlas, Asma. 2015. *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 187.

guardians of women, that they receive more inheritance because God prefers them to women, and that women should obey their men no matter what if they want to be in God's good graces. It is only a small step from there to saying women should not study or work or be socially active unless their men *allow* them to, otherwise they are being disobedient to the Qur'an itself. Except that this is not what the Qur'an says at all—far from it. **It is a monotheistic book, after all, uncompromising in its dictate that every human being submit to God and God alone, taking no other as his or her Lord.**

Some of us, even after hearing all the above arguments, will think of one other verse that is often cited to argue that men are better than women. But when that verse is read in full and in the context of its three preceding verses that condemn a certain kind of unfair divorce by husbands, it becomes clear that what it is saying is that **husbands bear a greater responsibility towards their wives than vice versa**, especially where a child is involved (more will be said about this verse and its context in Chap. 15, entitled Divorce):

The Cow, 2:228

Divorced women must wait alone [not re-marry] for three menstrual cycles, and it is not lawful for them to hide what God may have created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. And their husbands [who had unfairly divorced them] would be more just (*ahabb*) in taking them back in that case if they (the husbands) want to fix things (*islah*). Women are due the same as what they owe in kindness (*bil-maarooif*), and men (owe) a degree more than them. For God is Mighty, Wise.

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