

An Islamic Discourse

With Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah

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A colleague pointed out that Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah said *The husband has the right to beat his wife*, in his book *Islamic Contemplation About Women*(1). Shocked, I decided to probe into the matter. After reading the book, an interview seemed necessary with this eloquent and learned Moslem Shiite figure who believes that discourse is a primary condition for consolidating our beliefs and that no topic is too 'sacred' for discussion. Sayyed Fadlallah was sure to provide explanations about the tenants of Islam related to the husband's right to beat his wife. It is important to note that the specific issue at hand examines the conditions whereby the Islamic Shari'a, according to a Shiite interpretation, justifies physical punishment of an 'uncooperative' wife. Lack of cooperation refers to the wife's refusal of having sexual intercourse with her husband or, what Sayyed Fadlallah calls, rebellion against her husband.

To Sayyed Fadlallah, the issue of violence against women reflects all other forms of violence in the world; a world where force is inflicted on the weak by the strong. Hence, historical trends in the evolution of violence have culminated in discerning women as weak and inferior and men as strong and superior. Violence against women, therefore, is not limited to a specific culture or eth-

nic group. According to Fadlallah, the violence that men inflict on their wives emulates a universal aspect of women's subordination. He associates subordination with ambiguous situations that women put themselves in, as a result of their passive dependence on men. Using the example of the media, the Sayyed notes that women reinforce their own subordination by as-

certaining sexually suggestive images. Hence, excessive emphasis on the female and lesser attention to the male body suggest inequality, and one feels that they are totally dependent on men.

When it comes to how Islam interprets violence against women, Sayyed Fadlallah, said beating is permitted only under one strict condition: **When the wife does not respond to her husband, sexually, and rebels against him; when she refuses to have intercourse, which she should comply to at all times, unless she has an excuse or any circumstances, which prevent her from doing it.** It is worth noting that, according to Sayyed Fadlallah, a woman has the right to abstain from intercourse in certain situations. She has the right and the authority to specify these conditions in the marriage contract. Consequently, the husband will have no authority over her. Sayyed Fadlallah explains that this provision is not, however, widely used because very few are aware of it, creating, thus, another discrepancy between theory and practice in Islam.

Dwelling further on the husband's right to beat his wife, Sayyed Fadlallah warns against interpretations which overlook the two inherent aspects of

the situation: first, the existence of rebellion by the wife and second the means available to the husband for dealing with it. He explains that culturally and historically, patterns of male sexuality are known for being plural and multiple while those of women are monogamous. Hence, their sexual drives differ, men's being more immediate like the need for food and drink, whereas, in women, it is regulated by other circumstantial

mechanisms and conditions. Therefore, the instinctual drive of men being stronger than that of women and marriage being the only legal social and religious institution that satisfies and regulates sexual matters, women must respond to their husbands' request for sexual fulfilment.

Hence, what is a man to do when his wife rebels against those duties that are meant to protect the marriage and the family? asks Sayyed Fadlallah. What are the means available to a husband for dealing with the situation if his wife rebels, refusing to satisfy his sexual needs? The husband has a number of alternatives before resorting to beating his wife, which is the last course of action. The first is based on verbal communication whereby the husband reminds and lectures his partner about her role and duties as a wife. The second involves punishing her by rejecting her both physically and psychologically. If these al-

ternatives do not resolve the problem, the solution being that the wife recants her rebellion and listens to reason, the husband has the right to beat her. The following verse from the Koran indicates: And admonish those you fear may be rebellious; banish them to their couches and beat them. If they obey you, look not for any other way against them (Surat al-Nisa', verse 34). Interpretations of the Koran stress that the beating



should not be violent, should avoid the face and should not cause bruises (al-Zamakhshari, al-Khashaf, vol. 1, pg. 507).

Sayyed Fadlallah mentions other courses of action, which may sound more conventional to us. But, as he listed them, he indicated that they are not solutions as such. For instance, the husband may decide to take a second wife, which, according to the Sayyed, does not solve the problem should the

other wife develop the same attitude. Or, the husband may take the matter to (religious) court, which is not likely to interfere in what it considers a personal and intimate matter between spouses. He may resort to divorce, which is more of an escape mechanism than a solution. Sayyed Fadlallah explains the inadequacy of these alternatives saying that a solution should be based on realistic grounds for preserving and protecting the marriage.

Sayyed Fadlallah presents also another argument which authorizes the husband to be the decision-maker, by virtue of his role as the financial provider, the husband has the right to use force in order to preserve the marriage. By so doing, he is protecting it from a worse kind of violence, that of ruining the lives of those affected by the conflict. Sayyed Fadlallah considers that, in this sense, Islam uses a realistic approach to the problem of violence between husband and wife.

I then proceeded to ask Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah about the difference between violence against women in the Western world and the Third world. According to him, the West concentrates on publically condemning forms of violence against women while it continues to live in a general atmosphere of violence. This is evident in the increasing number of reported rape, murder and domestic abuse, he says. Whereas, the Third world, in general, and the Arab

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(1) Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, 1993. **Islamic Contemplations About Women: Ta'amulat Islamiyah Hawl al-Mara'**. Beirut: Dar al-Kalima.

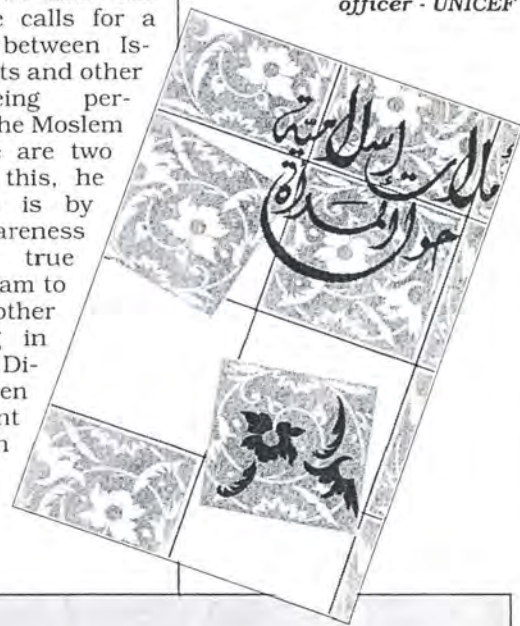
world, in particular, do not use force against women, arbitrarily. Often it occurs within specific traditional paradigms. Hence, women are beaten and even killed by a father, brother, son, nephew, or husband when they violate specific norms and values related to family honor.

Sayyed Fadlallah goes on to deliberate about Islam and the women's liberation movement. He stresses that Islam, contrary to what is believed, perceives of the woman as an independent human being. It is not decreed that she must obey a man because she is a woman. A woman has the right to refuse or accept to marry

the man. She is culturally independent and Islam does not prohibit her from working. Sayyed Fadlallah strongly stresses that the moral values and principles of Islam are the same for both men and women. He calls for a comparison between Islamic concepts and other notions being perpetuated in the Moslem world. There are two ways to do this, he says. One is by raising awareness about the true outlook of Islam to women; the other by engaging in discourse. Dialogue between the different trends, both

religious and secular, is the only constructive means for understanding the different concepts.

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Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah

Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah was born in 1936 in Najaf, Iraq. He is originally from the village of Ainata in South Lebanon. His father, Sayyed Abd al-Ra'ouf Fadlallah was a reputable religious leader. The Fadlallah family came from the holy city of Mecca and its lineage dates back to the Imam Hasan son of the Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb.

Sayyed Fadlallah attended primitive schools known as al-Katatib for two years, before moving into the tutorship of leading Islamic Ulamas, such as Sayyed al-Khou' and Sayyed Mohsen al-Hakim. He received the degree of Ijtihad at twenty eight. He then returned to Lebanon, and founded a school of religion, in the quarter of al-Nabba' in Beirut. He moved to the southern suburbs of the city, where he continues to reside, after the siege over Nabaa' during the civil war in Lebanon. In the suburbs he created a popular

Islamic movement that promotes dialogue, discourse and creates awareness among different classes and groups of people. Through the movement, Sayyed Fadlallah emphasizes the need to raise an educated and cultured youth and generation of Moslems.

Sayyed Fadlallah has over forty publications, of which the explanation of the Koran is the most important. He is also the founder of a philanthropic association, known as "Jamiyat al-Mabarat al-Khairiyah," which acts as an umbrella over at least ten smaller associations for the welfare of orphans and the education of the youth.

To many, Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, is political recognized in association with the Hizbollah, the Party of God. However, his public appearances focus on socio-religious issues.