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A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

Religion as intersecting risk in violence against women and girls

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Introduction

> These men take the verse [Qur'an 4:34] literally; they didn't look for the meaning behind these letters. My husband is like this. He says it is permissible to beat me…When he beats me, I ask, "does your religion permit you to do this?" and he says, "yes and that Allah made it obligatory for women to obey their husbands", but they forget that Allah ordered husbands to be good men and treat their women fairly.
>
> (Roqaya from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:150)

The above comment was shared by Roqaya,[1] a Syrian refugee woman, I interviewed during data collection in Ankara (Turkey) in 2019. As a survivor of domestic violence, alongside several other women, she expressed frustrations about her husband who abused her, justifying his behaviour based on his religious misbeliefs concerning gender relations in the family.

In this chapter, I discuss violence against women and girls (VAWG) from a Muslim perspective, drawing upon the voices of 21 Syrian and two Iraqi women survivors and their understanding of

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religion. I focus on the influences of Islam on women's experiences of violence, while recognising these often interact with other factors such as gender norms and culture, and so I consider religion as intersecting risk in VAWG. Unlike Chapter 8, where I explore religion as protective resource, here I show ways in which cultural and patriarchally constructed interpretations of religious texts can contribute to women's vulnerability to violence. Findings and discussion are structured alongside Ter Haar's (2011) religious resources: ideas, practices, experience and organisation, as outlined in Chapter 2.

Religious ideas: Ambiguous interpretations and attitudes to violence

Religious beliefs are a foundation of religion, based on and evolving around religious texts and personal experience of religion. What people believe in shapes their worldview, attitudes and behaviours. I begin from exploring what survivors of VAWG believe in and how this can shape their experiences. Muslim religious ideas derive from the primary sources of the Islamic traditions, namely the Qur'an and narrations of the sayings of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH), called the *Sunnah*. Even though Islamic sources condemn violence against women and promote kindness, non-violence in treating women and respecting women, some verses and narrations have been historically interpreted in ambiguous ways, favouring men and justifying certain practices harmful to women and girls. What this looks like in practice may differ over time and place. The relationships between religious worldviews, gender norms and attitudes to VAWG in different religious traditions vary as they are grounded in historical and geographical theologies (Istratii, 2020). Inevitably, religious ideas, as deeply intertwined with social norms, shape VAWG survivors' trajectories.

Religious beliefs often form a framework of reference for believers, shaping their understanding, attitudes and tolerance of VAWG. In this chapter, I specifically refer to one of the most contested and contentious verses of the Qur'an (4:34) – interpretations of which can either cause women to become vulnerable to violence or support their resilience (see Chapter 8). Verse 34 in Chapter 4

(titled *al-nisa*, in English' women') presents a three-stage way that a husband should follow in case of spousal disobedience and lewdness. If (first) admonishing and (second) leaving the conjugal bed does not help make amendments, men are instructed to the last (third) resort of '*idribuhunna*' (traditionally translated as 'disciplining' and 'lightly hitting' and compared to a tap with a toothbrush).

Most refugee women survivors of domestic violence, aged between 18 and 64, whom I met in Turkey, believed that VAWG is not allowed in their religion and the majority of the respondents spoke about the Prophetic practice and faith narratives that counter it. Many respondents' immediate response would be to state "Islam forbids violence against women". Nonetheless, I probed further with 12 women survivors (who each experienced domestic violence) about their understanding of the Qur'anic verse 4:34. They provided different interpretations, with some stating that physical discipline can be appropriate in some circumstances but without harming women. While five of the women felt that hitting a wife is never acceptable based on the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, four stated that gentle hitting can be used as discipline, two felt that hitting is appropriate if a wife makes mistakes and two felt it was allowed if a wife is unfaithful. Yet, although several of these women accepted 'light' violence in situation of *nushuz* (disobedience to husband), they did not apply this exception to the disproportionate violence they had suffered.

Literacy mattered too in shaping tolerance of VAWG. Respondents who felt literate in their religion (i.e. could read the Arabic scripture) could identify the three stages, described in the Qur'an 4:34, which a man should follow in reprimanding a wayward wife and reconcile family conflict. They emphasised that husbands often misinterpreted the third step, using it as an excuse to beat their wives. While some respondents, who identified themselves as unable to read the sacred text, were not aware of varied interpretations of *idribuhunna* and justified abuse, some said that women in general misunderstood the religious text themselves and tolerated abuse in silence:

> And for *idribuhunna*, there's a word before it: advise them, but if they didn't respond, then they can hit them lightly, but in

> these times, unfortunately, there are some women who don't listen to their husbands, and some men also take that verse and use it in the wrong way…the women keep silent, they hit them and use *idribuhunna* against their wives and they keep quiet and don't speak, and they didn't know the meaning behind this verse…
>
> *(Hanifah from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:173)*

Domestic violence was often tolerated, as several respondents spontaneously called it "a normal thing"; however survivors differed in their understandings of what constitutes misconduct (*nushuz)* deserving a spousal reprimand. According to some, spousal disobedience meant any immoral and anti-religious acts. Survivors who could identify varying interpretations of the Qur'anic verses that relate to disciplining a wife recognised that they themselves are contributing to the continued dominance of patriarchal interpretations of *idribuhunna* and other gendered beliefs, such as accepting polygamy. Indeed, expanding religious knowledge is a continued and contested process, for "religious texts are continuously (re)interpreted" (Khalaf-Elledge, 2021:13). In this process, the social transmission and reproduction of religious teachings can absorb and transmit hegemonic values, shaping women's attitudes to domestic violence. This is why Qur'anic interpretations vary in history, time and place. For instance, Chaudhry (2013) points out that pre-colonial interpretations of the Qur'an were incredibly patriarchal, and although in the postcolonial discourse alternative non-violent interpretations grounded in religious ethics have become available, many Islamic scholars still choose pre-colonial explanations which may help to maintain power disparities. Scholarly interpretations of Qur'an 4:34 illustrate how interpretations can vary. Ammar (2007) introduced four approaches of scholars to interpreting Qur'an 4:34, from (1) permission to discipline one's wife; (2) light and symbolic hitting; (3) interpreting *idribuhunna* as an exception to the wider Islamic principles and taking *idribuhunna* as permissible but not desirable; to (4) interpreting *idribuhunna* as something else than hitting, as per its meaning in other parts of the Qur'an, for example, to 'leave' or to 'separate' (e.g. Hassan, 2013; IICPSR and UNFPA, 2016).

Another religiously (and socially constructed) contested idea which underpins women's subordination is the concept of '*qawamoon*' (Qur'an 4:34), dictating that men should take financial care of their wives. Historically and normatively, *qawamoon* was often interpreted by men (using a patriarchal lens) as permission for men to manage women. However, there are numerous different translations of *qawamoon* in English, including 'manager', 'guardian' and 'maintainer' (Ashrof, 2005). In some communities, *qawamoon* may be interpreted as a dictating that men should rule women in other communities it is interpreted as referring to the responsibility that a man has to provide for his wife's material, financial and emotional needs. What is common, however, to many of these different interpretations is that they may appoint disproportionate decision-making powers to men and marginalise women's position in the family (Hassan, 1995). While some respondents rejected a patriarchal interpretation of the term, others referred to the *qawamoon* to legitimise the unequal power distribution between spouses and their responsibility to obey their husband. For example, Lamia from Syria said: "In our traditions and in the Qur'an also, there is a verse that men have an advantage over women, and from this *Surah*, the women should obey men" (quoted in Pertek, 2022:170). Upon probing Levantine respondents about the institution of *qawamoon*, significant power imbalances came into light, shaped not only by religious beliefs but many other factors, such as previous and concurrent family violence, neglect in childhood, loss of parents and/or poverty.

Similarly, religious interpretations shaped at times behaviours of perpetrators, even if they were described as not religious or not practising. Four survivors, whom I interviewed in Ankara, told me that their husbands used religious beliefs to condone abuse and justify their behaviours, taking advantage of their piety, sarcastically referring to religious text and misusing religious precepts to justify their behaviours. Particularly, as narrated by a handful of domestic violence survivors; women having greater trust in a higher power than their partners could be triggering for abusers to harm them at times. For example, Roqaya from Syria disclosed: "I told him that finding a house is in Allah's hands; if he wants it to be, then it'll

be, and he started beating me again, and he scratched my cheeks" (quoted in Pertek, 2022:196). In sum, there was a spectrum of religious interpretations that inform the different ways VAWG is understood by Muslim women. Their ambiguous attitudes operated alongside the continuum of gendered power, simultaneously serving as powerful determinants of resource distribution and gender relations in the household and community.

Religious practices: Violent silencing and (in/direct) harm

I now focus on how religious ideas can generate and enable religiously implicated practices that may deter victims from seeking support and indirectly and directly harm women and girls. What I discuss here are both practices that may be considered as called-for in religious scriptures as well as practices that may be seen as not justified in the scriptures. The latter as socially constructed are likely practices which were developed based on religious (mis) beliefs and wider social norms. One such practice is the notion to keep family matters private with discretion and concealment, which evolved within Muslim ethics, pre-Islamic gender norms and cultural norms of diverse Muslim societies. Keeping private issues private may be motivated by notions of 'modesty' and an understanding of an imagined 'good wife' who can be trusted and who will not expose private matters to strangers. Indeed, a range of religious beliefs dictate that good wives are obedient to their husbands (Qur'an 4:34) and it may be implied that in doing so they endure hardship. Such beliefs can become internalised barriers preventing victims from seeking help. In different geographical locations, the practice of domestic privacy takes on different names. For example, in Senegal it is known as *'Sutura'*. A GBV specialist interviewed in my PhD study based on her interactions with survivors described it as follows:

> *Sutura* is this concept that you must remain private, you know, like you shouldn't disclose everything. You can't talk openly about things you don't like, your wife in public, you

> wait until you're in the room, because of the *Sutura*, like this cover…I think that *Sutura* would be translated as discretion… you'd have to go through so much abuse to overcome that *Sutura* barrier…usually they don't tell you, you know, they don't say my husband beat me, or he insults me...they just say 'it's difficult'…
>
> *(Lucy, Regional GBV Advisor, International Organisation, Senegal, interview in 2020)*

While Lucy indicated that keeping domestic matters private was socially ascribed, the concept links with the archetype of piety promoted in religious communities as a virtue, a licence to prosperous life hereafter and a test of faith and theology in lived experience (Winkler, 2017). Piety of women of faith is a natural and powerful attribute and indeed a form of religious practice. However, abusive environments can build on and misuse piety. Generally, piety is a religious devotion which also commands a duty of maintaining self-respect, manifesting in a series of beliefs and acts related to service to God, which may make survivors endure violence and refrain from help-seeking.

Piety, as a scripturally validated practice, can be misused to justify the perpetration of VAWG and/or continued tolerance of VAWG. In particular, it can be misused to preserve family and individual honour by the concealment of family tensions and domestic abuse based on the assumptions that being an obedient and honourable woman is a prerequisite of piety. Several scriptural verses allude to harnessing honour and respect among women and men. And although the Qur'an calls both women and men to protect their chastity ("…for men and women who guard their chastity… for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward", Qur'an 33:35), cultural norms may focus on women's and girls' chastity as carriers of family honour and purity of lineage. In turn, feminine honour is determined by chastity, over which entire communities and families often feel responsibility for.

Honour and piety are also related concepts, as privacy and piety are. Pious women are seen as honourable women, who ought to protect their reputation. Such expectations can lead survivors to

silence themselves to maintain their reputation. Indeed, among the women I met in Turkey, some survivors considered the reporting of violence shameful. They kept silent to maintain their reputation because of wider social norms which blamed survivors for abuse. One woman said: "The problem with the society is that they take victim as it's their fault, it's not the person who is doing that, it's the person who is already a survivor/victim…, it's their fault" (Noor from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022:192).

The blaming and silencing of victims meant women rarely sought help. Thus, silencing victims in religious and wider communities becomes violent. Violent silence, shame, blame and honour concerns intertwine and perpetuate VAWG risks. For example, displaced survivors may avoid seeking help because of concerns about dishonour and shame, in addition to fears of losing custody of their children in a foreign land if they disclosed abuse in the household.

> …he told me, "why you came here, what would people say about our honour? That's very shameful, you're a young woman with two children…?"…I stayed with him [a brother of her deceased husband] for one week before my stepbrothers told me that I should go back to Syria or my husband's brother should marry me because many people would talk about family honour, and they told me I should move now or a killing would happen; he'd kill us or we'd kill him.
>
> *(Shamila from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:193)*

Dishonouring victims can also become a strategy of perpetrators, as it prevents victims from leaving. In one account of a Syrian survivor in Turkey, her abusive husband aimed to destroy her honour with lies about infidelities and through shaming her publicly. In addition, shame deterred women from seeking support not only concerning domestic violence, but also when they experienced conflict-related sexual violence. Some accounts of women living in conflict-affected settings recalled how powerless victims of

violence in war times were due to multiple factors, including religion, as intersecting risk and cross-cutting issue.

> …they [soldiers] were entering homes, if they want, they can take, nobody can stop them, because soldiers with weapons can…they can do anything to you. Women can't speak about that, it is very shameful in our religion and education, in our tradition…Because if you talk you will destroy your future… maybe everyone around you knows your story, nobody will want to marry you…
>
> *(Amira from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:185)*

Arranged marriage, often enforced to protect family honour, as well as divorce were also religiously implicated practices. In the case of Syrian and Iraqi women, breaking arranged marriages and engagements was considered traditionally unacceptable, culturally inappropriate, shameful and threatening to the family honour, as reported by several Syrian and Iraqi respondents in Turkey. Yasmeen from Syria was one of the women who married as a minor with a considerably older man, whom she divorced years later during her stay in Ankara. She revealed:

> It was an arranged marriage. He came and paid money for my family, and after I met him, I told my mother that I don't want him, and I took the money and gave it back to his family, and my mother said that this is shameful; people will talk about my honour, and that I was engaged to him for 3 months…No, after I met him many times, I decided that I don't want him, but my mother pushed me.
>
> *(interview in 2019)*

Unlike arranged marriages, early and forced marriages are considered impermissible in Islam, as minors are not allowed to enter into binding contracts and so disqualify marriage contract conditions (Pertek and Abdulaziz, 2018). For these reasons, early marriages are also considered as forced marriages. Yet, in efforts to maintain

family honour, sometimes early (forced) and arranged marriages are seen as solutions to protect girls' chastity and the family name. Some communities allow minors to marry if they are perceived as physically and socially mature enough, while other communities justify the practice based on orally transmitted tradition of the Prophet Muhammed's marriage with Ayesha bint Abu Bakr, whose specific age of marriage remains unknown and contested. She later became a highly respected figure in Islam – distinguished Islamic scholar and a mother of the believers in the Islamic tradition.

Nevertheless, women and girls subjected to arranged or early and forced marriages may feel unable to withdraw from an arranged marriage and/or to early seek divorce due to the complex intersection between culture, religion and intergenerational gender norms. Religion and culture are inseparable, and mutually constitutive, they may enable and oppose VAWG in local communities. Religion can be a part of a culture by shaping cultural norms, and culture can be a part of religion by shaping religious practices (Ghafournia, 2017). In my study, several Levantine respondents married as minors and endured violence for years due to the cultural expectations of upholding family honour by saving their marriages. For example, for Amira from Syria, divorce was not an option, as her uncle made clear to her his honour-based concerns:

> He said "I came back to Syria after 8 years, because of you. No woman gets divorce in this family…look, you are my brother's daughter, you are my honour, I don't want you to get divorced because this is very bad thing for you…"
>
> *(quoted in Pertek, 2022a:171)*

In addition, some interviewees were encouraged to stay in abusive relationships by family members who were themselves victims of intimate-partner violence, indicating the intergenerational nature of VAWG.

Another phenomenon condoned based on family honour at the intersection of culture and religion was FGM/C which I found in Ethiopia during a gender study in Dekasuftu Woreda. FGM/C in

this setting was a common practice to protect girls' chastity and ensure their 'marriageability'. One woman during community awareness activities questioned: "If we stop FGM/C, who [will] marry our girls?" (IRE in Pertek, 2020:143). While FGM/C was perceived as means to protect girls' honour by preventing them from engaging in illicit intimate relationships, girls who had not been cut were stigmatised and ostracised by community members. Women's voices in local communities contended that "FGM/C is our culture; it is difficult to change or stop [it]" (IRE in Pertek, 2020:143). Some of the older women in focus group discussions (above 50 years old) argued that throughout their lives, as Muslims, they believed FGM/C practice was important and allowed. However, during VAWG awareness sessions run by IRE, they had been told that FGM/C is harmful: "I am 57 years old and we were Muslim long time ago; I have never heard before [that] FGM/C is harmful. Why today [has it] become harmful?" (ibid.). Indeed, harmful practices are deeply ingrained in existing social and power structures over time. The above example shows that behaviours may dynamically interact with religious ideas and wider social norms and so faith-sensitive interventions are required to help change mindsets to counter VAWG. I continue the analysis of how the religion-culture-violence nexus was addressed with faith sensitivity in Dekasuftu Woreda in Chapter 8.

Religious experience: Endurance and spiritual violence

Ter Haar (2011) suggests religion may stimulate in believers certain cognitive, psychological and emotional experiences. These experiences can contribute to VAWG and deter healing of victims or counter abuse and facilitate healing (as discussed in Chapter 8). People undergoing religious experiences feel a personal and direct experience of God or God-inspired events, inconceivable to outsiders. Such experiences evoke intense feelings and convictions that can affect all areas of life, including vulnerability and recovery. Religious experiences are often a manifestation of people's religious ideas and practices and can go hand in hand with piety. For example, one survivor residing in Ankara, compared her situation

to a *mi'raj* ('the ascension into heaven'), which was the central spiritual experience of the key figure of Islam, Prophet Muhammed (PBUH).

> Sometimes, I talk to Allah and tell him that even the prophets and messengers couldn't handle this life, so how could I handle it?…I remember our prophet's story…His life was very difficult, full of hardships, but regardless of all of that, when he went to "*Sidra Al-Montaha*" [heaven], he preferred to come back to this life to get more reward; that makes me strong. I also read Qur'an, even when I sleep, I see in my dream that I'm reading Qur'an…*Surah* [Chapter] *Al-Waqia*…
>
> *(Shamila from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:238)*

While relying on the Prophetic stories instils strength in survivors/victims, as discussed in detail in Chapter 8, this may also incline them towards inaction and endurance of violence, with feelings of hopelessness and resignation, minimising the importance of this life (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). In the above citation, Shamila dreamed about the Qur'anic chapter *Al-Waqia* (in English meaning 'inevitable' or 'the event') which focuses on the afterlife and fates of righteous and unrighteous people. In her case, by questioning how the Prophet could handle the harms of this life, she found respite in holding on to the promise of great reward afterlife (see Chapter 8). However, while facing multiple abuses from different perpetrators, such beliefs became for her a mantra shifting her focus from the present to the future hereafter, playing out as a mixed blessing. While emulating the endurance of the prophets and other key religious figures can be empowering (Haeri, 2007), for some survivors it can minimise their own suffering and deter action. In turn, a psychological relief may hold them back from seeking to change their harmful circumstances.

Similarly, the Islamic virtue of accepting hardship and being grateful to God, whatever the circumstances, may encourage victims to persevere and wait patiently for years – even their whole lives. As such, strength derived from faith can indeed become a palliative measure (Swart, 2013). For example, religious experiences linked to VAWG, underpinned by religious beliefs in destiny

and reward in the afterlife, may sometimes delay survivors from help-seeking and lead them to tolerate abuse (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). Beliefs in religious incentives can make victims tolerate spousal abuse in hopes of a greater reward, namely the spiritual experience of going to heaven. Such was the case for Mariam from Syria who disclosed: "He swears at us, he gets angry with me, and that's his right, I mean, he's sick, and I totally accept it and endure it; I want to go to heaven…" (quoted in Pertek, 2022:196).

Embodying patience (as a religious virtue) silenced victims, too. For example, some survivors were sometimes advised by religious leaders to remain patient and faithful. For example, Lotifa from Syria said: "He [local imam] would tell me to endure it [her husband's misbehaviour] and be patient when I'd tell him that I am feeling distressed, he'd always tell me to pray and make Duaa [prayer/supplication]" (quoted in Pertek, 2022:174). While the virtue of patience is often preached by religious leaders, it may be misconstrued by victims trapped in abusive relationships. To reduce such risks, faith leaders should link religious teachings on patience with the importance of protecting human life and dignity, as valued religious virtues, too.

Accounting for how religious practices and beliefs shape spiritual experiences can help developing a deeper understanding of survivors' re/actions to VAWG. For example, some survivors, I spoke with, counted on dreams from God to move forward with their lives. Night dreams were interpreted by several survivors as signs from God that gave them courage (see Chapter 8). Another telling example was the religious experience of a pilgrimage – a highly religious moment – during which one victim forgave her husband for protracted abuse and decided to stay with him despite high risks of continued harm. While forgiveness by the victim and the promise of inner transformation by a perpetrator is necessary for healing and family conflict resolution, in practice, it can be a strategy of deterrence furthering a cycle of abuse. Nonetheless, survivors inspired by spiritual experience may believe in their partners' inner transformation. Religious survivors may also pray for perpetrators and believe that the violence will ultimately cease, as several respondents in my study did. Spiritual experiences, expressed in feelings of being guided by religious beliefs, may make victims

wait for God to change their situation or until they feel divinely inspired to leave abusive relationships. Indeed, spiritual experiences can inspire passive coping strategies which involve emotional coping methods (Finn, 1985). Several survivors, whom I interviewed in my PhD study, perceived suffering as a sacrifice and a test from God, generating feelings of despair and powerlessness, yet submitting to their destiny. In sum, deeply spiritual experiences may combine with emotions, ultimate reliance on God and a range of religious teachings in ways that lead victims to minimise the harm done to them and delay seeking help.

Finally, spiritual struggles – psychological distress of a religious or spiritual nature – such as feelings of abandonment and punishment by God, can intensify the suffering and hinder the healing of survivors (Rutledge et al., 2021; Pertek, 2022). While there are different causes of spiritual struggles, among others, they can be triggered by spiritual violence as my research found with Syrian and Iraqi women war survivors. Spiritual violence can be broadly described as a misuse of spiritual means to control, harass, demean and exploit others to cause harm. In war conditions, many respondents described how spiritual violence violated their relationship with the divine and infringed on their belief system in ways which challenged their religious experience and caused spiritual struggles. Clearly, violence can work not only on the body but also on the soul by indoctrination of different forms (Galtung, 1969). Reported threat to women's religious beliefs and shrinking freedom of belief was common during religious persecution in Syria, where respondents' beliefs and practices were challenged. Especially some Muslim women felt their religion (Sunni Islam) was compromised when combatants imposed a distorted understanding of religion. In so doing, they inflicted psychological and spiritual violence – in other words – violence on the soul of religious women, by violating their relationships with the divine and altering their religious experience. One woman said:

> I lived with Daesh for five months. They wanted to make us go backward, to the era of ignorance. If a strange man comes to your area, you should cover your face and hands, and if you

> walk with your husband with your face uncovered, they will stone your husband. I felt so scared, we arrived at a situation where we were thinking, "Is that Islam?". We started questioning our faith and many people stopped believing in it. They would find mistakes in everything we do, our prayers, the way we recite Shahada [the testimony of faith]…But our religion is not like that.
>
> *(Amina from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:184)*

Drawing upon Galtung's (1990) concept of de-socialisation (e.g. moving away from one's culture and being resocialised into another) as a form of direct violence, I argue that distorting and violating certain religious experiences and imposing others can be considered as a form of violence. In addition, women survivors of war, I interviewed in Turkey, spoke about distrusting faith groups and religious organisations, having experienced severe violations of freedom of religion during the conflict in Syria. Such aversion was underpinned by their experiences of religious persecution and inter-sectarian discrimination. These women preferred to rely on their own understanding of religion and direct connection with God to avoid oppressive interpretations. They also developed mistrust towards religious leaders and preferred to rely on their own religious knowledge drawing on their spiritual capital.

Religious organisation: Dictating patriarchal (dis)order

In this section, I finally look at religious organisation to explore how power imbalances in religious communities can constitute (dis)order normalising VAWG. Violence, in turn, can constitute order (Jakobsen, 2016). I explore the gender-culture and religion nexus with impacts on and of VAWG in religious organisation/communities, showing how religious ideas, practices and experiences manifest and interact in lived experiences of religious communities.

Religion offers a system of values and symbols with emotional impact, altruistic commitments and community through shared

rituals and beliefs (Turner, 1991). Yet, religion does not have agency; as it does not do anything on its own (Beckford, 2003), these are religious organisation, communities and individuals that bring religion to life. A process of enacting the religion is gendered and so are the structures of religious communities that are formed as a result. Patriarchy influences the ways religion is enacted and embodied by religious communities, often twisting religious interpretations which may advantage some and disadvantage others in producing hierarchical gender relations. Patriarchy literally means 'rule of a father' and was first deployed by feminist discourse post-1960s to systematically analyse men's superiority and women's subordination. It refers to a set of ideas that justify male domination and create gender disparities in power across cultures (Ahmad et al., 2004), including in religious community structures. Patriarchy dominates within both religion and culture shaping a patriarchal (dis)order where men may play dominant role in public sphere, and women may be expected to play subordinate role. Religious beliefs sometimes are (mis)used to justify such order of existence and can "confine women to traditional roles" (Ferris, 2011:623). For instance, despite the fact that over half of Islamic religious sources were narrated by women (most by Ayesha, Prophet Muhammed's wife), certain exegeses are used to block female leadership by seizing power and neglecting women's views.

An example of patriarchal (dis)order in religious organisation was vividly illustrated by refugee women I met in Turkey. They explained that patriarchal attitudes and behaviours in some Muslim communities were driven by a lack of religious knowledge and individual piety among men. The women argued that, in general, men in their community did not know how to follow the Prophetic tradition of kindness and honouring women. Instead, they viewed women as incomplete in their religious duties (as they are not required to pray and fast during menses) and men as intellectually superior because of women's presumed faith 'deficiencies'. One woman explained:

> There is another Hadith that says women's minds aren't complete, and their religion isn't complete, but it's because we

> have our periods and we don't pray nor fast during this time so our religion is not complete from that side, they [men] know all of this but they don't understand.
>
> *(Samira from Syria, interview in 2019)*

Beliefs belittling women are in opposition to the Islamic thought that states that God created all human beings perfectly regardless of their gender (Qur'an, 95:4). Yet, the perceived "incompleteness" in religious duties during women's menses spilled over into other areas of life, for instance, as reported by several respondents, exclusion from important family decisions, such as naming of children. Several women reflected on the selective uptake of religion by men in their communities and felt that men should increase their religious knowledge by learning from their role model, Prophet Muhammed, about how to treat women and girls appropriately.

> The most thing we need as Arabs is spreading awareness and educating men about women's rights here in Turkey because most of them need a psychological cure to their minds…They need to know their religion better…Allah said that they should be soft with the women, but men in our community only care about that verse that allows marrying more than once. That's what they understand from the Qur'an and from the religion. They didn't look at how the Prophet was treating his wives and daughters; they don't care about that, and because of that, we need good Imams in our religion.
>
> *(Mira from Syria, interview in 2019)*

Refugee women in Turkey reported different causes of family violence which were related to the structures of their communities. The key reasons cited for normalising VAWG, indirectly intersected with religious beliefs and included patriarchal cultural and tribal gender norms, such as male dominance and female subordination, pressure on women to maintain family honour and remain obedient to her husband and her mother-in-law as well as family pressure on men to discipline their wives. Survivors spoke of a

culture of tolerating the physical punishment of women, in which members of religious communities rarely intervened as abuse was justified intergenerationally. Women of previous generations endured violence too, normalising these behaviours. Such finding is supported by a survey by UN Women on masculinity norms in MENA which found that only a minority of Muslim men rejected the statement that religion can be used to justify violence against women (El Feki et al., 2017).

A similar phenomenon of gender injustice was apparent in the Somali Regional State. In the focus group discussions in a gender study with the Somali community in remote areas of Dekasuftu Woreda[2] in 2015, I identified that both women and men valued their gender roles differently. Foremost, men and women saw men's position in front of God as superior to women. In support of such claim both women and men respondents spoke about the story of creation and Eve's origin from Adam's rib, which may allude to Christian tradition. The narration of Eve's creation from Adam's rib is considered in some Muslim religious sources as inauthentic (Hassan, 1995; Ashrof, 2005). And although religious communities showed some awareness of the equality of souls regardless of one's gender (as created from a single soul, Qur'an 7:189), this did not translate into attributing equal societal value to women and men in real life which as a result manifested in varying forms of violence discussed herein. Local men generally considered themselves as more important contributors to socio-economic life and as the rightful decision-makers in the family. Local women did not criticise this gendered order, as it had appeared to them as natural "conditions of existence" (Bourdieu, 1977:167). Most had been socialised into believing that being a 'good wife' might equate with fulfilling their religious duty of obedience. Both men and women attached male leadership in the household to a divine order, which was believed to be prescribed in the religious scriptures. Even if a husband did not provide financially for his wife, he was still often considered a legitimate head of household.

In Dekasuftu Woreda, FGM/C, early marriage and domestic violence were identified as highly tolerated practices by both women and men. The tolerance of women's subordination was

also widespread and normalised from an early age. Girls, I interviewed in schools, told me that overall their peers attended school until they got married or dropped out due to domestic duties such as fetching water and caring for siblings. Some girls who attended madrassas spoke about being taught the socio-religious etiquette of being a woman, including what to do and not do during their menses and maintaining a religious attire, yet they were not taught women's rights in the Islamic tradition. Similarly, girls' and women's rights were not discussed in public in their religious communities, perhaps perpetuating religious illiteracy on women's position in society. During my visit, when I asked women about notions of equality, most were opposed to what they considered the Western concept of gender equality, seeing it as incompatible with their lifestyle as mothers. Although motherhood is highly esteemed in Islam and believers are obliged to respect mothers, the way women were often treated by male relatives did not reflect such commitments.

Patriarchal gender norms are known to lead to abuse of power and violence in family and community. One of the commonly reported protection concerns by participants in community conversations was domestic violence in the home, which was seen as a measure to discipline a wife, widely tolerated in local communities of Dekasuftu Woreda. One man illustrated such abusive and discriminatory attitudes:

> Woman should [be] beaten because they are like children and therefore need to be punished [physically] when they make mistakes…sometimes women need to be beaten even when they are depressed to stimulate them…beating is the solution for women to discipline them. Otherwise, the women undermine the husbands up to the point that it will be difficult to identify who is the husband or the wife.
>
> *(Kale, a male representative from the Sero Kebele,*[3] *IRE quoted in Pertek, 2020:142)*

In these communities, domestic violence was seen as 'good beating' (coined by Jakobsen, 2015), as it helped maintain power and

differentiated gender roles between spouses to uphold distribution of labour and community structures. While participants did not cite religious reasons to justify domestic violence, the intertwinement of culture and tradition appeared to shape gender norms in these communities. Similarly, in the same communities, women condoned VAWG too, reflecting how religious communities were socialised and structured. For example, some women submitted to social norms tolerating violence. Some believed acts of spousal violence symbolised marital love from their concerned husbands. Equally, some women perceived that a lack of violence in marriage signalled a problem in marriage. One respondent said:

> I believe being beaten by [my] husband is right and acceptable … if [my] husband did not beat [me] when [I] make a mistake it implies that there is something wrong with marriage or [my] husband doesn't love [me].
>
> *(Sahra, a female representative from Kudabul Kebele, IRE quoted in Pertek, 2020:142)*

Concurrently, the justifications of domestic abuses dominantly conflated with traditional beliefs in spiritual possessions of unrighteous wives among religious communities. Use of force was justified by some men in Dekasuftu Woreda as a measure to verify a woman's spiritual purity. Some newly married men used to hit their brides on the first night of their union to identify if a bride is controlled by evil spirits. If a woman submitted to violence, she was deemed chase and clean from spirits, while resistance indicated spirit possession. A woman accused of evil possession would be tied to a tree and forced into cleansing procedure (Pertek, 2020). In addition, marriage by inheritance was common, although not linked with religious beliefs but rather culture. Many widows believed that marrying a brother of her deceased husband was not just a cultural but also a religious practice obligatory upon a widow. Some women believed they would risk losing their children and property if they refused to marry a relative of their deceased husband, or had they re-married outside of the deceased husband's family they

would be required to pay compensation, that is, ten camels or the equivalent (Pertek, 2020). Some women feared that they would lose a chance to remarry at all.

The above examples demonstrate how patriarchal gender and cultural norms, often intersecting with but also going beyond religious ideas, practices and experiences, intertwine and manifest in religious communities. The culture–religion–abuse nexus requires the analysis from "within the Muslim cultural context" as historical and geographic locations affect cultures (McKerl, 2009:2001). Religious communities are the outcome constituted by, and constitutive of, social relations with power relations (Winter, 2006). Social norms, as part of culture, are rather inseparable from religion. Faith-based gender 'schemas' and 'ideals', which prove religious, and social norms enacted by religious communities are inseparable (Manji, 2018:212). Interactions between religion and culture vary over place and time, "…as a cultural aspect the interpretation and expression of religions will also be contextually constructed and under constant change" (Askeland and Dohlie, 2015:263). Similarly, religious communities constantly evolve alongside changing religious manifestations and so intersecting risks to violence.

Conclusions

Religion can operate as an intersecting risk to VAWG, often in interaction with other factors such as gender norms, culture and patriarchy. Different religious resources can contribute to experiences of violence. Patriarchal interpretations, readings of religious texts out of context, varying understandings of religion and different levels of religious literacy of survivors and perpetrators may lead to power imbalances and tolerance of abuse. In this chapter, in particular, I examined how interpretations of the contentious verse of the Qur'an (4:34) can affect women's vulnerability to gendered harm. I looked at how religiously implicated practices around honour and piety can silence survivors and directly and indirectly perpetrate abuse. I also outlined how religious experiences can encourage survivors to endure/submit to violence and cause

spiritual tensions, pointing to the necessity for research, policy and practice to better understand the link between religious experiences and VAWG. Finally, I explored how religious communities may organise themselves in ways dictating patriarchal (dis)order, focusing on the challenges in religious communities. I looked at how the religious beliefs, practices and experiences can interact together in shaping structures, gender norms and behaviours, often in ways undermining women's safety and exacerbating vulnerability to violence. I problematised the deeply intricated religion and culture nexus drawing upon the programmatic experience from Dekasuftu Woreda in Ethiopia's Somali Regional Estate, which I further explore in Chapter 8, highlighting the need for policy and practice to attend to these complex intertwinements. In sum, religious and cultural expressions across two contexts created a compound of different beliefs and practices, shaping experiences of VAWG. The solutions for rupturing violence and positive change are likely to come from within, drawing upon the individual and communal resources of survivors and religious communities.

Notes

1 All names of respondents are pseudonymized.
2 A *Woreda* is an administrative district in Ethiopia.
3 A *Kebele* is the smallest administrative unit of Ethiopia, similar to a ward or a neighbourhood.

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