

***{La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah } There is no power nor strength
except through Allah***

Recently, a woman needed an official document signed by a government official. She was lucky enough to get in touch with a high-level official who kindly offered to help her, asking her to come at a certain time to the administrative office so he could take care of her need.



After she arrived and went through security, she was led to the building where the official's office was. Her papers were received by an administrative assistant, and she was asked to wait until the official was ready to see her. As she sat in the waiting area to be called in, a slow realization dawned on her: she had come to the office after-hours, as there seemed to be no one else around save the (male) administrative assistant and the official with whom she was about to meet. She began wondering if she should make an excuse to leave, but felt hesitant as to how to do so politely. A thought came to her mind: was it allowed in the Shariah for her to be there in the first place? But the rules of *khalwa* (unlawful seclusion) were unclear in her mind, and she continued to sit in the waiting area anxiously mulling over her situation.

Finally she was called in, and was left alone for a long while with the official. He was polite and gave her some help on the official task she had come for, but the meeting was overly long and chatty. Once the meeting was over, she left the office only to realize that the administrative assistant was long gone, and she had been in the office building all alone with the official for at least a half hour. A sobering thought then took over her mind: what if things had not gone as benignly as they had? And, was there anything she could have done to prevent herself from being in such a situation?

As the famous saying goes, "Knowledge is power." From the perspective of the Muslim, this

is very true especially when knowledge is defined as “to know what Allah Most High commands.” When we know the rulings of the Sacred Law and apply them as they should be implemented, a tremendous source of strength and protection automatically arises in our favor.

The Intrinsic Weakness of the Human Being

Coming face to face with our own vulnerability is disheartening, until we realize that this aspect of the human being is what is meant to be. Allah Most High has confirmed that weakness is built into the nature of the human being: “*wa khuliqa al-insanu da’ifa* (Man has been created direly weak).” [1] To feel vulnerable is a necessary part of being human; it serves as the ultimate sign pointing to the fact that we are ever in need of the Help and Protection of Allah.

In general, women are socially and physically weaker than men, and so understand weakness easily. The fact that some men prey on women sexually, exploiting women’s weakness for their own sexual advantage, is a historical reality from which we cannot escape. For this reason, women have special access to sensing their own weakness, and thereby realizing and accepting their intrinsic need of Allah.

Men with *taqwa* (Godfearingness) also perceive their own weakness, even if this weakness is of a different type and they access this self-knowledge in a different way than women. When he sees the evil misdeeds of other people, the spiritually conscious man realizes how close he himself is to such low potential, and resolves to rise higher and do better than the moral weakness displayed by others. [2]

Becoming aware of one’s own weakness can at first be frightening or overwhelming. The Devil begins his whispering: *there is no way you are going to get out of this one, I am too weak to resist, no one in my situation could ever overcome the potential to fall here.*

However, as Muslims who know that Allah exists, we are called upon to turn our attention away from these whisperings and away from our own weakness, and turn instead toward the Power and Might of Allah to find protection and solace. By turning to Allah for strength instead of to our own weak selves, we find guidance in how to navigate our interactions with other people (including those with evil intentions). We also find an internal certainty and confidence that is otherwise unattainable, because the more we develop our relationship with Allah, the more we understand and appreciate His power and protection.

The first and foremost way to develop our relationship with Allah is to learn what He wants from us, and then obey Him. Such obedience brings about subtle understandings of how truly amazing the *deen* (religion) of Allah is, and how much benefit we can find by implementing it within our lives.

The scenario highlighted above is one that has played out commonly throughout history, where a woman finds herself alone with a man and does not know how to leave the situation. The current age has exacerbated the problem of sexual violence against women due to the presence of the internet, where exploitation is faster and easier to accomplish, and can be done on a larger scale. Some situations involve blunt force and violence, putting the woman in a position where she can do nothing to help herself. But many situations of sexual impropriety and exploitation can be avoided if women implement the rulings of the Shariah upon themselves.

The rulings should also be implemented by believing men, because they help men to protect themselves from the weakness of their own selves as well as the evil intentions of others. Three examples of how this works are outlined below. These rulings from the Sacred Law of Islam provide every believer with the means to develop *taqwa* (Godfearingness) in the arena of sexuality and social and personal accountability.

Being Empowered Through the Shariah

I. Avoiding exposing one's nakedness

It is well-known that following Prophetic Practice (the Sunnah) entails avoiding exposing one's nakedness as much as possible. The Shariah defines "nakedness" (*'awrah*) clearly, as to what parts of the body can and cannot be exposed, and in front of whom. These rules differ slightly for men and women, but for both sexes, the minimum nakedness is generally defined as the area from the navel to the knees. It is not to be exposed in front of anyone except one's spouse, and even there, the Sunnah encourages married couples to engage in sexual activity beneath a sheet or cover of some sort.

'Utba ibn 'Abd al-Sulami narrates that the Prophet of Allah ﷺ said:

"When any one of you is intimate with his spouse, let him cover himself.

One should not be completely naked like the nakedness of two wild asses.” [3]

The encouragement to keep oneself covered as much as possible is a known part of religious Muslim practice. It is common, for instance, for both men and women of piety to wear a type of loincloth or undergarment on the lower part of the body while bathing. This is the case for even when one is alone, [4] because the Muslim knows that other unseen beings are present even if no other human being is.

“Clothing one’s nakedness (from the eyes of men as well as jinn and angels, for these too see people in this world) is obligatory, by scholarly consensus (ijma’), even when alone, except when there is need to undress. [5]

Muslims are taught by the scholars of religion that even when changing garments, they should avoid exposing their nakedness as much as possible. For instance, they are encouraged to change one’s shirt first, before changing one’s pants or lower garment, so that at no point in time is the ‘awrah ever fully exposed. It was the Sunnah of the Beloved Prophet ﷺ to change clothing in this way; he would also sit down while changing the lower garment as a way to further avoid exposure. Of the advices of the Prophet ﷺ is that when compelled due to some need to uncover one’s nakedness, the Muslim should say the words “Bismillah alladhi la ilaha illa huw” (In the Name of Allah, other than Whom there is no god) as a way to seek protection from the prying eyes of the jinn.

Many pious men and women to this day maintain modest dress even in the privacy of their homes, because they wish to maintain the presence of angels. It is not unheard of for women of piety to keep their heads covered (with a kerchief or the like) as they knead dough and prep food. Such people, eager to remain always in remembrance of God, recite Qur’an or other religious texts while engaged in such menial tasks, always keeping their heads and bodies covered. All of these actions are premised on the fact that Allah Most High loves modesty and those who are modest.

“Modesty is from faith.” [6]

“Modesty brings only good.” [7]

If we were to reflect on the truth of modesty being a source of good, and we understood how even in privacy, modesty serves as a means of protection, we would gain strength to not expose ourselves when urged to do so against our intuition and emotional comfort. Young people today are manipulated by online predators to expose themselves, often by being trapped with an initial email exchange that the victim never expected to go in a wrong direction. Some people have also been videotaped illegally and unknowingly in places where it is common to undress, such as in changing rooms at the doctor's office or gym. As Muslims, if we know the rules and etiquette of how to dress and undress, with the priority of maintaining modesty as much as possible at all times, the exploitative potential of hidden cameras and evil intentions can be mitigated to a large degree.

***O noble Prophet, tell your wives and daughters
and the wives of the believers to draw close over themselves
their full-length head covers: That is surer for them
to be recognized as such and not shown harm;
And verily Allah was ever all-forgiving,
all-compassionate. [8]***

Maintaining a core level of modesty even when we are alone also helps develop a general consciousness of the presence of Allah, so that if we are faced with temptation, we are less susceptible to its beckoning. Someone who is accustomed to remembering Allah and being shy in front of His angels and unseen beings in his daily moments of undressing, is less susceptible to letting his guard down and succumbing to *haram* (forbidden) sexual interaction. This is because his *taqwa* had already been engaged within his mind and in his daily practice for some time, and so would serve as a guard against that which is displeasing to Allah.

II. Avoiding unlawful seclusion (khalwa)

A man and woman who are not *mahrams* to each other are not allowed to be alone together, a "*mahram*" being either one's spouse or else a close relative to whom marriage is forbidden

(like one's father, brother or uncle).

Ibn `Abbas said, "I heard the Messenger of Allah ﷺ give a sermon. He said, 'A man should not seclude himself with a woman except that there be with her someone who is of unmarriageable kin (*mahram*).'" [9]

Muslims are aware of this ruling of the Sacred Law, but what does "alone together" mean exactly? The scholars of Islam explain the rulings regarding unlawful seclusion (*khalwa*) in some detail. Unlawful seclusion for a man and woman is to be "alone in an enclosed area in such a way that a third party cannot easily enter upon them." Public places are generally excluded from this definition, [10] because the idea of a place being "public" is that other people are around or expected to be around.

One must make sure to learn and understand these definitions and legal rulings properly, and use one's judgment to assess situations with a cool head and a strong intention to obey Allah. The goal of these rulings is to protect individuals against *fitna*, i.e. immoral acts and harm, so one should use both knowledge of the Shariah's rules as well as a clear picture of the situation one is in, in order to be able to act rightly.

For instance, in the case of the woman at the administrative office who had gone to get help from the government official, she had misunderstood the "public place" allowance of the legal ruling. She thought to herself, I am in a "public place" so it must be okay that I am here alone with this man. But by public place, what is meant in the Shariah is a location where it is expected that a third person can walk in at any moment, i.e. a place where the woman is not isolated enough that the man could feel comfortable to make a move (or vice versa). If the two of them had to be in an office together, what would make the scenario permissible in the Shariah would be if the door had been left open and there were people coming and going in the hallway right outside the door.

Later, when the woman realized the exact details of the ruling, she remarked to a friend, "I would have had the courage to leave if I had known that the Shariah did not allow me to be there at that time. Knowing the ruling would have given me the strength to make some excuse and get out of there without meeting the official at all." People of *taqwa* find strength through Allah in such a manner. She did not feel confident or comfortable enough to leave on her own, but with the knowledge of what Allah was commanding her to do at that moment, she felt she could have stood up and acted on what needed to be done. Having knowledge of the *deen* and of what Allah commands is therefore a critical factor in helping

us gain strength to protect ourselves from what could potentially go very wrong.

III. Avoiding Traveling Alone

It is related in an authentic hadith of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that traveling alone is not a good thing, whether for man or woman.

It was narrated from ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās that the Prophet ﷺ said: “The (lone) rider is a devil, two riders are two devils and three are a traveling party.” [11]

Various interpretations are given for why the Prophet ﷺ warned us against solo travel, without a proper group (or “traveling party”): the danger of being on a deserted route; if something went wrong or one got ill or died, there would be no one to care for one or help out; and the fact that being on one’s own can lead to devilish thoughts, where a person could be led astray and do *haram* or unlawful acts due to his loneliness.

For men, the ruling on traveling solo is either that it is disliked or prohibited, depending on the situation. Airplane travel, or travel along busy routes, for instance, are not considered to be indicated from this hadith.

For women, it makes sense to take special heed from the implications of this hadith for ourselves. If men, who are not as vulnerable to harassment as women, have been discouraged by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ from traveling by themselves, shouldn’t the woman take extra precaution? It is through this very wisdom that we can understand the following hadith.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “It is not permissible for a woman who believes in Allah and the Last Day to make a journey of a day and night unless she is accompanied by a mahram.” [12]

In today’s world of ease of travel and busily occupied routes and airports, many scholars give women the same fatwa as men: that if the route is safe and occupied, and she is with a group of some sort (such as her own female companions, or a large group of people such as

the passengers on a plane), then it may be permissible for her to travel without a *mahram* to serve as her male guardian and protector.

But women should take care to look to the ruling and make decisions with *taqwa* and sensibility at the forefront of their minds. The default is that it is not a good idea to travel alone for any believer. If there is a need, and the route is safe, the means of travel is solidly reliable, and one is with enough reliable people that one could not easily be taken advantage of, then it might make sense to take the “*rukhsa*” or legal exception of traveling without a *mahram* in such circumstances.

Still, one should keep in mind that the default state according to Prophetic teaching is that it is more desirable for a person to be at home than to be in a state of travel.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Travel is a piece of torment. It prevents one of you from eating, drinking, and sleeping. When he has finished his purpose, let him hasten back to his family.” [13]

Traveling to war-torn countries for administering aid (where the women of the locale are themselves in danger, let alone a foreign woman from outside), or traveling for pleasure to unknown places without a clear purpose nor even a plan for self-protection, is a type of obliviousness to what God has communicated to us via His Beloved Prophet about the inherent vulnerability within travel.

Some women may resent this vulnerability for whatever reason, which is understandable given contemporary, feminist-type rhetoric regarding sexual abuse, where those in the stronger position are held primarily to account. Such women may feel it is unfair that they have to check their own behavior because of the evil intentions of someone else. But as I have argued elsewhere, [14] acknowledging and accepting one’s vulnerability is itself a moral good within Islam. Recognizing one’s weakness allows us to act with prudence, and helps us see and appreciate the wisdom in why Allah Most High has made certain rulings the way He has. Of course, those with bad intentions should be called to right behavior, but the potentially vulnerable party must also take preventative steps as Allah has commanded.

In the face of sexual tension (i.e. in those situations where religiously ordained sexual lines may be crossed), it is up to both parties to remain cognizant of what needs to be done to prevent that crossing of the line from happening, even if neither of those parties has any inappropriate intention. One may ask, “How far must the restrictions go? Regardless of

what I do, someone else might still have what it takes to violate me.” The answer is to look not to the conclusions of our own moral guesswork, but to the rules and responsibilities that have been outlined by the One who created us, since He knows us and how we work better than we know ourselves. Upholding sexual responsibility [15] on our end—where we are careful to implement divine commands such as the ones outlined above—goes a long way toward both self-protection and gaining the Help of Allah.

Make Allah Your Protecting Friend

These were just three rulings from the Shariah that can help empower people, and women in particular, against sexual impropriety and exploitation. There are countless other aspects of the teachings of Islam that also help in this regard, such as the requirement of men to protect and serve their womenfolk (*mahrams*); the rules of interaction regarding how men and women should talk and behave with each other; and the general encouragement in Islam for women to feel tied to and most comfortable in their homes.

We must remember the basic human tendency within the sexual arena: men pursue what they are attracted to, and women like to attract male attention. Unfortunately, many of us naively assume that this back and forth between attraction and response will remain contained within our own personal expectations, not knowing what the other might actually want or expect (sometimes until it is too late!). It is this unspoken sexual ambiguity that religious rules like those listed above aim to regulate and ameliorate.

Thus, acting on the rulings of the Shariah helps us protect ourselves from slipping into the *haram* and from being molested. We must remember that taking the means to obey Allah is itself a source of protection, for when we do as He commands, He comes to our aid:

“Allah Almighty said: ‘O son of Adam, stand for Me, and I will walk to you. Walk to Me, and I will come running to you.’ [16]

“Whoever has taqwa of Allah, He will make a way out for him, and provide him from where he does not reckon.” [17]

Along with obeying Him in such matters, what also serves as a source of strength and protection is simply believing in Allah, asking for His Help, and trusting in Him. We should make it a habit to learn the protective prayers taught to us in the Qur'an and in the Prophetic teachings, such as Ayat al-Kursi, Surah al-Falaq and Surah al-Nas, and the many other protective words of prayer that Rasulullah ﷺ taught us. [18] We should learn them, and then *use them*, regularly and often, so that the Protective Power of Allah remains with us at all times.

Allah Himself is the faithful protecting friend

of all who shall believe,

He brings them out of deepest darknesses into light. [19]

Finally, someone who has made a mistake, such as corresponding freely with a non-*mahram*, only to find herself being taken advantage of by him, should not be afraid to quit the sin while she is ahead. Cybersex criminals count on the woman's sense of shame to push her further into trouble, by threatening to expose what has already happened between them to her family and friends unless she obliges him to do even worse things for the sake of his pleasure.

A woman who finds herself in such a bind should remember that the mercy of Allah is greater, and that through a simple act of repentance, she will find herself on His good side, coming to her aid. This applies to men as well; after having indulged in unlawful sexual behavior, they may feel unable and hopeless at being able to turn a new leaf and rectify their relationship with Allah. But for both women and men in this situation, the thing to remember is that—even while we are required to take action and continually try to move forward in the right direction—real strength only comes from Allah. For those who have made mistakes in the sexual arena, *tawba* (repentance) is the exact means needed to attract Divine Assistance to help one stop the bad action and move toward a better place both physically and spiritually.

“My people,

ask forgiveness of your Lord for your idolatry,

and what is more, turn ever after in repentance to Him,

and He will loose the sky to you raining down in steady ample measure;

And increase you in might unto your might (wa yazidkum quwwatan ila quwwatikum).

Nor turn away committing crimes.” [20]

Human beings, both men and women, have been created with the inherent capacity to slip up, so that they can afterwards turn to Allah and seek Him out with renewed ferventness, and learn through their mistakes how utterly fallible each of us is, and how perfectly Masterful is our Lord. In situations of coercion and sexual manipulation, we should hold fast to our trust in Allah, and compel ourselves to remember that He can make even the worst situations better. Whatever humiliation one is afraid might come about due to a misstep can easily be canceled and wiped away by the Might and Power of Allah.

Be conscious of Allah wherever you are. Follow the bad deed with a good one to erase it, and engage others with beautiful character. [21]

Through our very belief in teachings such as these, we are empowered by the Might and Strength and Protection and Help of the Almighty. This is in fact the ultimate (and only real) source of empowerment, and it is through such means that we can find solace in troubled times.

References

[1] Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4.28. All Quranic translations in this essay taken from Keller, Nuh Ha Mim, The Quran Beheld: An English Translation from the Arabic. Stanchion Press, 2022.

[2] After recent incidents of sexual impropriety and exploitation in the American Muslim community, one of the reactions I heard from religious Muslim men was “If he can slip up like that, someone like me better be careful (since I am not better or stronger than him).” I am grateful that they were able to share such candid feedback, may Allah Most High reward them.

[3] (Sunan ibn Majah p.138 v.1)

[4] Some Hanafi scholars said it was recommended to remain covered even when one is alone, while the stronger opinion is that it is obligatory (wajib). Rabbani, Faraz, "Remaining Naked When Alone,"

<https://seekersguidance.org/answers/general-counsel/remaining-naked-whenalone/#:~:text=Answer%3A%20In%20the%20name%20of%20Allah%2C%20Most%20Merciful.&text=In%20general%2C%20it%20is%20either,too%2C%20as%20many%20chose%20it.> [Last accessed: October 16, 2024.]

[5] Keller, Nuh Ha Mim, *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*. Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1994, p. 121. This statement represents the position of the Shafi'i school. See previous endnote for clarification for the Hanafi school.

[6] Bukhari and Muslim.

[7] Bukhari and Muslim.

[8] Qur'an, Surah al-Ahzab, 33:59 (emphasis added).

[9] Bukhari and Muslim.

[10] Younas, Salman, "Hadith About Seclusion (*khalwa*) and Unmarriageable Kin (*mahram*), <https://seekersguidance.org/answers/general-counsel/hadith-about-seclusion-khalwa-and-unmarriageablekin-mahram/>. [Last accessed: October 4, 2024.]

[11] Narrated by At-Tirmidhi, 1674.

[12] Bukhari and Muslim.

[13] Bukhari and Muslim.

[14] Khan, Fareeha, "The Impact of Individualism on Family" (forthcoming), thesilainitiative.org. See in particular the section "Individualism's Impact on Moral Thinking Regarding Family."

[15] For more on the concept of sexual responsibility, see Khan, Fareeha "Sexual Responsibility and the Fulfillment of Desire," <https://thesilainitiative.org/articles/sexual-responsibility-and-the-fulfillment-ofdesire/20220728/by-dr-fareeha-khan/>.

[16] Hadith Qudsi, sahih (authentic), from Musnad Imam Ahmad, 15925.

<https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2023/06/07/allah-comes-running/> [Last accessed: October 16, 2024.]

[17] Qur'an, Surah al-Talaq, 65: 2-3.

[18] For example: It was narrated that Khawlah bint Hakim al-Sulamiyyah said: I heard the Messenger of ﷺ say: "Whoever makes a stop on a journey and says, "A'udhu bi kalimat Allah il-tammati min sharri ma khalaqa (I seek refuge in the perfect words of Allah from the evil of that which He has created)," nothing will harm him until he moves on from that place." (Muslim)

[19] Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:257. Translation taken from Keller, The Quran Beheld, p. 43.

[20] Qur'an, Surah Hud 11:52 (emphasis added).

[21] Hadith narrated by al-Tirmidhi

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