

**The feminist challenge of Qur'an verse 4:34: An
analysis of progressive and reformist
approaches and their impact in British Muslim
communities**

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I firstly analyse the approaches of progressive and reformist scholars toward the controversial Qur'anic verse 4:34 and secondly, assess the ways these approaches impact British Muslims' daily lives. Through this analysis, I argue that although progressive scholars have presented strong new interpretations and translations of concepts like men's authority in marriage (*'qawwamuna'*), women's rebellion against that authority (*'nushuz'*) and practicing wife-beating (*'idribuhunna'*) that challenge traditional understandings of the marital relationship, they do not fully succeed in denouncing the Qur'anic permission for wife-beating. Reformist scholars on the other hand propose a rejection of this verse based on moral objections rather than on re-interpretations rooted in Islamic tradition, which might prove to be the only way to denounce wife-beating in a contemporary context. Finally, based on qualitative interviews I conclude that British Muslims are aware of different feminist approaches to verse 4:34, and that they have implemented both progressive and reformist arguments and methodologies in their teachings and daily lives.

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1. Introduction

“O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah...”

(Qur'an 4:135¹)

For many Muslims today, deciding whether a certain idea or practice can be adopted in their lives relies firstly on the answer to the question whether it is compatible with or allowed in Islam. Through reading the Qur'an, Muslim scholars have deduced general Islamic principles and objectives that Muslims should live by, as well as guidelines for specific situations, such as the marital relationship. It is these specific teachings that have recently become challenged by Islamic scholars, who are concerned with the application of teachings that they see as specific to the context of the revelation. One of these teachings is verse 4:34:

“Men are [qawammuna] over women with what God has favored some over others and with what they (men) spend out of their wealth. (In their turn) righteous women are devoted and guard the unseen as God has guarded (it). As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly). But if they obey you, then seek nothing against them. Behold, God is most high and great”

Muslim women living in the 21st century feel increasingly uncomfortable reading the text they see as the word of God giving a – limited or outright - permission for violence against women, as well as mentioning the concept of men's ‘authority’ over their ‘obedient’ wives. Several Muslim scholars have attempted to reinterpret this verse through using classical hermeneutical principles, such as referring to prophetic hadith, analysing the reasons for revelation and the

¹ Translation by Ali. [Online] Available at <http://quran.com/4/34>.

objectives of this particular verse, with the aim of finding an interpretation for the command '*idribuhunna*' that does not signify physical violence. I believe progressive scholars play a major role in challenging the still widespread classical and (neo-)traditional interpretations of this verse, which condone (a limited form of) wife-beating, and uphold patriarchal ideals about gender relations in marriage (Shaikh 1997; Chaudhry 2013). However, following reformist scholars Esack (2001) and Ali (2006) I argue that a re-interpretation of a clear permission to beat wives might be a virtually impossible task. While I acknowledge progressive Muslim scholars' ground-breaking efforts to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Qur'an verse 4:34 and the permission for wife-beating in particular, I argue that these interpretations only partly resolve the tensions that arise from this verse as they base their authority on a tradition that does not have the same understandings of social justice and gender equality as we have today. Rather, feminist scholars need to recognize the patriarchal elements of the Qur'anic text within the context of the revelation and take a conscientious step back from the application of certain Qur'anic verses such as 4:34.

In arguing this, I am inspired by feminist scholar Amina Wadud (1997, 2006) whose approach to verse 4:34 has changed from progressive – or as some scholars have said, apologetic (Esack 2001, Moosa 2003) – to reformist, as she outright rejects any Islamic permission for violence against women (2006:200). I argue that the reformist approach might be the only approach to 4:34 that recognises the Qur'an's inherent patriarchal elements while still continuing its overarching objective of achieving justice in our contemporary context. However, I also realize that reformist Islamic thought is still quite far removed from becoming mainstream in the Islamic discourse, which is reflected in the interviews I conducted. Lived realities of British Muslims illustrate that most Muslims are content with a progressive approach to the issue of wife-beating and feel that this approach is effective in challenging domestic abuse in the Muslim community, although some reformist changes have taken place. I contend that differences in opinion and approach are inherent part of the search for the same goal - gender equality in marriage and society and the erasure of violence against women in Islam - and should be

recognized and used to challenge interpretations that justify any form of inequality or violence in the name of the Islamic tradition.

2. Framework

2.1 Context

The focus of this dissertation is on perceptions of Qur'an 4:34 and the issue of domestic violence in British Muslim communities today. There are several reasons for the choice of British Muslims specifically. The first reason is that I believe that Muslim living in a region that advocates freedom of religion and freedom of opinion, and where Islam has a moral weight rather than a legal coercive power, find themselves in the position of being able to decide whether and how they apply Islamic teachings in their lives (Ali 2006). Secondly, the worrying rise of Islamophobia has led to persistent prejudice and stereotyping against Muslims in the West, in particular with regard to the status of women and the compatibility of Islam with the West². All of my interviewees expressed concern over misunderstandings of Islamic teachings on women's rights and domestic violence by non-Muslims as well as by Muslims in their community, as well as the justification of domestic violence through referring to Qur'anic verses such as 4:34. For these reasons, I believe an analysis of interpretations that erase contradictions and possibilities for abuse will be highly useful.

But first, I feel that a note on my position and conceptual framework is needed. Firstly, I acknowledge that my outsider perspective as a non-Muslim can make it complicated for me to be critical yet objective of a tradition and teachings I do not identify with. Secondly, I believe I also have to be very aware of the post-colonial context we find ourselves in, and the negative connotation of the concept of feminism as Western imperialist tool to 'liberate women'. I do not have the right nor the intention to try and "save Muslim women" (Abu-Lughod 2013) who themselves might feel very comfortable with the gender roles Islam has provided them, and

² According to a recent survey by YouGov Cambridge Programme, 55 per cent of British voters think "there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society". YouGov (2015). *The Majority of voters doubt that Islam is compatible with British values*. [online] Available from <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/03/30/majority-voters-doubt-islam-compatible-british-val/>. [Accessed 27/08/2015].

might see 'feminism' or 'women's liberation' as unnecessary as they feel that Islam has given them all the rights they need (Al-Hibri 1997). However, for those Muslim women who do not feel satisfied with the level of equality and justice advanced by the Qur'an, Islamic feminist discourse can be able to resolve tensions arising from reading the Qur'an in a contemporary context and to challenge inequalities and violence against women in an Islamic framework. It is my aim to analyse how Muslim feminist scholars find new interpretations for Qur'an verse 4:34 and whether these are effective in challenging the conception that Islam sanctions domestic violence.

2.2 Methodology

In this paper, I analyse how Muslim feminist scholars have addressed the issues that arise when reading *Surah al-Nisa*, verse 34, which proposes wife-beating as one of the solutions for marital disharmony, in a contemporary context which espouses values of gender equality and social justice, and which does not allow for any form of violence against women. Whereas the primary controversy of verse 4:34 is with regard to the injunction to 'beat' wives, I also analyse the ways feminist scholars have challenged problematic concepts of men's authority over women (*qawwamun*), 'obedient' women (*qanitat*) and women's rebellion (*nushuz*).

Firstly, through a critical analysis of the interpretations and methodology of Islamic feminist scholars of verse 4:34, I assess the extent to which the patriarchal tradition can be challenged without completely rejecting its authority. I aim to find an answer to the question of how Muslim feminist scholars reconcile the contradicting Qur'anic verses on marriage, such as verse 4:34 on one hand and verses that express equality between man and woman (3:195, 49:13), and that marriage should be built on love, mercy and respect (30:21).

Secondly, I have conducted qualitative interviews with four people who hold authority in or close links with Muslim communities. The interviews typically lasted around 1.5-2 hours and consisted of open-ended and closed questions, allowing room for elaborating on specific details or for asking additional questions. My interviewees are:

- Sheikh Khalifa Ezzat, chief imam at the London Central Mosque,
- Abdullah Hassan, imam at the Holborn Mosque and member of the 'Imams Against Domestic Abuse' campaign,
- Khola Hassan, assistant judge at the Sharia Council UK,
- Khalida Haque, counselling psychotherapist specialised in domestic abuse in Muslim/South-East Asian communities.

I chose these people for several reasons, and I believe they have contributed to my research in different, but equally significant ways. Firstly, Imam Khalifa Ezzat and Imam Hassan have given me an insight into the issues Muslim couples experience on a daily basis, and the different interpretations of Qur'an 4:34 to limit domestic abuse in the community. Secondly, because of the topic of my research, I deemed it necessary to interview two women as well. My interview with Ms. Hassan has given me a nuanced image of the Muslim marriage relationship in Britain today, and the struggle of reconciling patriarchal religious and cultural traditions with equal rights in marriage and divorce. Finally, Ms. Haque provided me with a different angle on the issue of domestic abuse, stressing the need for communication within marriage and within the community, as well as the need for practical solutions rather than idealistic rules for the Muslim marriage relationship.

The aim of these interviews was firstly to illustrate the extent to which Islamic feminist debates on verse 4:34 have permeated British Muslim society, and to identify the different perspectives of Muslim authorities on the marriage relationship and the issue of domestic violence.

Moreover, the interview responses demonstrate the continued tensions between holding on to Islamic traditions and responding to contemporary notions of gender egalitarianism as well as practical realities that need to be addressed. Finally, through these interviews I demonstrate that both progressive and reformist interpretations of Qur'an 4:34 on the dynamics of Muslim marriage relationship and the issue of domestic abuse can address contradictions and abuse 'in

the name of Islam' resulting from continued patriarchal traditions in Muslim communities as well as the misconceptions about men and women's rights and responsibilities in Islam.

3. Analysis of feminist approaches to verse 4:34

“Islamic feminism is a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.” (Barlas 2004:1).

Classical and modern (neo-)traditionalist scholars use what Mahmoud calls the “limitation strategy” (2006:544) by permitting wife-beating but only under limited circumstances and “without causing harm” (Stalinsky & Yehushua 2004; Chaudhry 2013). Muslim feminist scholars, on the other hand, argue that they cannot condone wife-beating under any circumstance, using what Mahmoud calls the “virtual abrogation strategy” (2006:545). However, scholars are divided into two significantly different approaches in order to accomplish virtual abrogation: the first approach, is through demonstrating that *idribuhunna* has been wrongly interpreted as “beat them”, and proposing a new meaning of the word, while the second is to acknowledge that the Qur'anic text allows wife-beating, but not allow it in today's context (Mahmoud 2006; Dunn & Kellison 2010). The first approach is usually known as progressive or idealist, while the second has been known as reformist (Chaudhry 2006; 2013).

3.1 The progressive approach

Among the progressive or idealist scholars are Wadud (1997), Barlas (2002), Al-Hibri (2003), Mubarak (2004), Shaikh (2007) and Bakhtiar (2007; 2011)³. Progressives direct their attention to challenging the patriarchal interpretations of the text, not the text itself (Scott 2009:60). A distinction between text and interpretation is essential in order to find new meaning without being accused of criticising the word of God. Whereas the Qur'an as the literal word of God, is

³ Although Bakhtiar considers her work as reformist (2006), I classify her with the progressives as she attempts to find new meanings for *daraba* rather than reject verse 4:34.

eternal and unchanging, and therefore cannot be questioned, the patriarchal Qur'anic exegesis are and should be very much open for criticism and historicisation (Mubarak 2004:266).

Interpretations can and must “adapt to changing societal circumstances and norms” (Barlas 2002:188). After all, the Qur'an itself urges Muslims to use their reason in order to find the true meaning of the text (Ibid).

Although progressives value classical Qur'anic exegesis as an important guide to understanding the Qur'an, they argue that these exegetes were ultimately influenced by the dominant paradigms of their societies (Mubarak 2004:267). Wadud argues that we need to acknowledge the influence of context in Qur'anic exegesis in order to propose an interpretation relevant to today's historical, social and cultural context, based on a context-based reading of the Qur'an and an adherence to *tawhid*, the unity of God (1997:xii). Progressive scholars criticise classical exegetes who read the Qur'an in an atomistic, verse-by-verse way (Wadud 1997:2), as a contextual reading of verse 4:34 – and the whole Qur'an – is essential to the progressive approach (Ibid; Barlas 2002; Scott 2009). Progressive scholars place the responsibility for the lack of gender equality with these patriarchal interpretations, rather than the Qur'an itself, which they see as embodying principles of justice and gender egalitarianism (Barlas 2002; Mubarak 2004). Classical exegetes on the other hand, have been overly influenced by their patriarchal mind-set and historical context, which led them to read patriarchal and misogynist elements into the Qur'anic text (Mubarak 2004; Abbas & Riaz 2011).

Rather, Mubarak argues, we must read Qur'an 4:34 in the light of the principles expressed throughout the Qur'an, more specifically, within the “paradigm of gender relations established by the Qur'an” (2004:274). Through an analysis of verses pertaining to gender relations, progressive scholars have concluded that the Qur'an considers men and women equal on an ethico-religious level (Wadud 1997:100), that they are created equally (Nurmilla 2013), that there is no theological assumption of men's superiority over women in Islam (Hassan 1991:9), and that there are no gender roles assigned by the Qur'an (Barlas 2002:149). Although the

Qur'an acknowledges biological differences between men and women, and treats men and women in different ways with regard to some issues - for example, maintenance and inheritance - this does not imply sexual inequality between them (Ibid:152). In other words, to ensure equality of opportunity, a different treatment of men and women is necessary. It is within this framework that Muslim progressives re-read the concepts expressed in verse 4:34.

Progressive scholars have proposed a methodology of exegesis based on classical hermeneutical principles, to examine Qur'an verse 4:34 and the issue of wife-beating in particular. By analysing the purpose of this verse, the socio-historical context in which this verse was revealed, the prophet's conscientious struggle regarding the husband's right to physically discipline his wife as well as by invoking human responsibility, Muslim feminists argue that a gender-egalitarian reading of 4:34, which invalidates the injunction of wife-beating, is not only possible, but also valid within the Islamic tradition.

I will analyse the ways progressive scholars have challenged classical interpretations of concepts expressed in this verse by deconstructing verse 4:34 into these four concepts:

- Men's authority over women ('*qawwamuna*' and '*faddala*'),
- The concept of righteous women ('*qanitat*'),
- The wife's rebellion ('*nushuz*'),
- The three-step solution to resolve *nushuz*, including wife-beating ('*idribhunna*').

Men's authority over women ('qawwamuna' and 'faddala')

"Men are [qawwamuna] over women, with what Allah has favoured some of them over others, and with what they (men) spend of their wealth. [...]"⁴

Classical Islamic scholars have interpreted *qawwamuna* as men holding a divinely-ordained authority over women as a result of their patriarchal environment and personal values (Barlas

⁴ Translation by Mubarak (2004:262). I opted for this particular translation here because I believe this to be a neutral translation which leaves room for interpretation in both a classical and feminist way.

2002). This authority or *qiwama* is then based on men's superiority over women (Shaikh 1997; Lamrabet 2015) and/or their financial responsibility (Mahmoud 2006:540). As Muslim feminists have demonstrated, men's perceived superiority and excellence – for reasons such as intellect, strength or their ability to pray – does not find any justification in the Qur'an, but is a product of the historical and societal context classical exegetes found themselves in (Shaikh 1997, Mahmoud 2006).

How do Muslim feminist then interpret these concepts? Wadud asserts that, the only reference in the Qur'an to any 'preference' or 'favour' given to men over women by Allah is with regard to material preference, more specifically, in matters of inheritance (1997:70). The Qur'an specifies in verse 4:11 that men's share of inheritance is double the share of women's. The other condition of verse 4:34, "and with what they spend of their wealth" refers to men's responsibility to provide for women (Ibid). Similarly, Hassan translates *qawwamuna* as 'breadwinners' (1991:55). Furthermore, Hassan and Wadud argue that, as the Qur'an does imply that "there are at least some men who do not provide for women" (Ibid; Wadud 1997:71) by using "some" over "others" – no gender specified – and therefore this part of the verse should be seen as a "normative" or idealistic statement, describing how the ideal Muslim family should function rather than descriptive of the social context of seventh-century Arabia (Ibid).

Both Wadud and Ali also emphasise that there is reciprocity of privilege and responsibility: Because men receive a bigger share of inheritance, they are responsible for paying out of their wealth for the support of women (Ibid:71; Ali 2006:119). In other words, men who do not support women financially, do not enjoy this degree of *qiwamah*. Similarly, Al-Hibri highlights that a man is *qawwamun* over a woman only when two conditions are fulfilled: that he has a certain ability or knowledge over a woman on a particular subject, and that he is maintaining her (1997:30).

Hassan also makes the important remark that the fact that men are *qawwamuna* does not imply that women cannot or should not provide for themselves, rather, it is men's responsibility to relieve women from the additional burden of providing when being responsible for childbearing and rearing (1991:55).

Lastly, any feminist have argued that interpreting *qawwamuna* over women does not imply men's divine superiority over women, as this implies a power relationship between two people, which is contradicting the Islamic principle of *tawhid* (the unicity of Allah) (Al-Hibri 1997:10; Ruether 1993; Wadud 2006:23-32). This places men in a position of "divine intermediaries or semi-Gods" (Shaikh 1997:10), which is considered *shirk* (idolatry), the opposite of *tawhid*.

Reading the first part of verse 4:34 while bearing in mind the overarching Qur'anic principles of social and gender justice, the social and historical context of seventh-century Arabia as well as the limitations of what Allah has favoured men over women in terms of financial responsibilities, lays the groundwork for a more gender-egalitarian reading of this verse.

The concept of righteous women ('qanitat')

"(In their turn) righteous women are [*qanitat*] and guard the unseen as God has guarded (it)."

Whereas classical exegetes see the meaning of *qanitat* as "obedient" – to the husband, to God or even both, feminist scholars agree that this "obedience" is mean towards God. *Qanitat* is derived from the noun "*qunut*" which refers "the act of being devoutly obedient to God" (Al-Hibri 2003:213). Therefore, *qanitat* are women are devoutly obedient to God. Secondly, as this word is used throughout the Qur'an for both men (2:238, 3:17) and women (66:5, 66:12) or both at the same time (33:35) (Wadud 1997:74). Therefore, *qanitat* in verse 4:34 cannot refer to "women obedient to men", but rather is a characteristic of believers towards Allah (Ibid).

Furthermore, feminist scholars have criticised classical interpretations that consider a wife's obedience to the husband as "subsumed under obedience to God" (Al-Hibri 2003:215). These interpretations govern women's religious morality through their behaviour towards men which again places men in the 'divine intermediary' position (Shaikh 1997), which is considered *shirk*.

With regard to "guard the unseen as God has guarded (it)", feminist scholars generally interpret this as "fulfil their religious obligations and protect their faith, as God has guarded it" (Ali 2006:199). Al-Hibri prefers to translate "the unseen" as "the marital covenant", which they should guard in their husband's absence – if they did not, they would be "disobeying God" (Al-Hibri 2003:214).

The wife's rebellion ('nushuz')

"As for those (women) on whose part you fear [nushuz]"

In a similar fashion to *qanitat*, feminist scholars challenge the traditional interpretation of *nushuz*. Whereas the Arabic word *nushuz* literally means "protuberance" (Abdel Halim 2011:209), classical exegetes most often interpret it as rebellion or (sexual) disobedience, toward the husband (Shaikh 1997:11). Feminist scholars challenge this interpretation – which again assumes a relationship where the husband holds the authority – by firstly remarking that *nushuz* is used in the Qur'an for both men (4:128) and women (4:34), although it is defined differently (Wadud 1997: 74; Abdel Halim 2011:209). Other scholars have addressed the issue of male and female *nushuz*, its different meanings – such as "ill-treatment" or "desertion" – , implications for the other partner and the possible solutions. For example, whereas the solution for a wife's *nushuz* is the three-step solution in Qur'an 4:34, the Qur'an seems to suggest only one solution for the husband's *nushuz* – settlement (separation) (Ali 2006:121). Abdel Halim (2011) also draws attention to the fact that classical scholars spent remarkably less attention to the occurrence of husbandly *nushuz* and the solution offered to the wife. In order to have a

gender-egalitarian reading of the Qur'an, feminist scholars prefer to interpret *nushuz* as “resistance” (Bakhtiar 2011:434) or “marital disharmony” (Wadud 1997:75; Ali 2006:120).

The three-step solution to resolve nushuz, including wife-beating ('idribuhunna')

In the case '*nushuz*' occurs (or is feared to occur), the Qur'an proposes a three step solution for resolving *nushuz*:

“Admonish them (first), (next) separate them in beds (and last) beat them.”

In line with classical and feminist scholars, Mubarak has added an emphasis on the sequence of the three steps in her translation of this verse, which underlines the argument that 'beating' is only the last resort (Wadud 1997:75; Hassan 1999:265, Al-Hibri 2003:220). Feminist and classical scholars do not differ greatly in their interpretation of the first step, “admonish them”. Firstly, the husband should talk to his wife and reason with her (Wadud 1997:75), and find out the reasons for her “act of defiance” and to offer “counselling” (Hassan 1999:265). If this fails, the second step is to “separate them in beds”, which can vary between a night apart – as a “cooling-off period” (Wadud 1997:76) – or a continued, “indefinite” separation which could lead to divorce, without needing to resort to the last step, beating (Ibid). Other scholars have also argued for this interpretation, invoking the prophetic example as a guideline: When experiencing marital conflict, the prophet never resorted to beating his wives but only opted for verbal reasoning and separation (Silvers 2006:177).

Finally, it cannot be ignored that the third step of the solution proposed in Qur'an 4:34 is *idribuhunna* – literally “beat them”. Progressives are faced with the question of how to reconcile the instruction of 'beating' with these principles as well as with contradicting Qur'anic injunctions, such as that marriage is built on 'love and mercy' (30:21) and that spouses are each other's 'garments' (2:187)? How does wife-beating fit within a marital relationship where spouses are encouraged to 'live in kindness' (4:19, 2:237)? And as the Qur'an specifies similar

rights for each spouse (2:228), why does only the husband have the right to physically discipline his wife?

Progressives aim to demonstrate that *idribuhunna* never intended to be interpreted as sanctioning wife-beating through a number of ways. Firstly they demonstrate that the Qur'an supports gender equality by referring to several Qur'anic verses that discuss reciprocal rights for men and women (Wadud 1997:8), as discussed earlier. Secondly they analyse the context of this verse and finally, carry out a grammatical and semantic analysis of the word. They base this analysis on three classical hermeneutical principles: authentic prophetic hadith, the reasons for revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) and the objective (*maqсад*) of this verse.

Re-readings of verse 4:34 negotiate the meaning of *idribuhunna* as 'beating' based on the different meanings of its origin "*daraba*" elsewhere in the Qur'an (Ammar 2007; Bakhtiar 2011). Among these meanings are "to travel the earth, to beat, to set up, to give examples, to take away, to condemn, to seal, to cover, to explain, to have sex, and others" (Ammar 2007:523). Mernissi (1991:57) refers to the prophetic example to argue for an interpretation as "stay away" or "divorce". Other meanings of *idribuhunna* based on Qur'anic precedence or prophetic example include:

- "set an example" (Wadud 1997),
- "create an effect upon her" (through counselling and sexual abandonment) (Mubarak 2004:285),
- "hold in confinement" (Hassan 1999:265; Barlas 2002:208)
- "separate or move away" (Abusulayman 2003:9),
- "have sex with them, mingle with them or turn away from them" (Kabbani & Ziad 2001 in Chaudhry 2013:182),
- "go away from them" (Bakhtiar 2011).

Scholars justify these alternative translations by relying on authentic prophetic hadith which demonstrate that firstly, the prophet experienced a “struggle of conscience” (Sivers 2006:176) with regard to wife-beating and actually discouraged husbands from practising wife-beating, and secondly, the prophet never hit any of his wives. Bakhtiar (2011) argues that if *idribuhunna* was intended to mean ‘beat them’, this would imply that the prophet did not follow God’s command to beat his wives. Rather his actions confirm that *idribuhunna* means ‘go away from them’ rather than ‘beat’ (Bakhtiar 2001:433).

By adopting this strategy, feminist scholars privilege the Sunnah above the Qur'an by arguing that the Sunnah provides a better understanding of verse 4:34, which was never meant to advocate wife-beating (Chaudhry 2006:160). By relying on the classical hermeneutical principles of *asbab al-nuzul*, *maqsad* as well as authentic prophetic hadith, feminist scholars are able to address the issue of wife-beating “in a way that remains unquestionably Islamic” (Dunn & Kellison 2010:26).

Authentic prophetic hadith are important with regard to challenging the sanctioning of wife-beating and the husband’s authority in marriage, as these hadiths demonstrate the life and actions of the prophet himself, who is seen as “the most comprehensive and perfect example of God’s guidance to us” (Sivers 2006:177). Both classical and feminist scholars have referred to several hadiths that related the Prophet’s “moral dilemma” regarding the issue of the husband’s right to physically discipline his wife – which I will discuss below. Many progressive scholars consider the prophet’s moral struggle with wife-beating and the fact that he himself never practiced it sufficient to virtually abrogate the literal implementation of verse 4:34 (Sivers 2006:177; Dunn & Kellison 2010:25).

One of the most famous hadiths on the issue of wife-beating is the authentic hadith on the authority of the prophet's wife Aisha:

“The Prophet of God, may peace and blessings be upon him, never hit anyone with his hand, neither a woman nor a servant, except when struggling in the path of God” [Muslim] (Chaudhry 2011:420).

Another hadith, narrated by Bukhari, Muslim and others report the prophet having said:

“Could any of you beat your wife as he would a slave, and then lie with her in the evening?” (Mubarak 2004:277).

A different hadith is related on the authority of Al-Bayhaqi:

The Prophet of God, may peace and blessings be upon him said, “**Do not hit the maidservants of Allah.**” As a result the women became audacious and they [exhibited] offensive behaviour toward their husbands. Then ‘Umar, may God be pleased with him, said [to Muhammad], “O Prophet of God, since you prohibited [husbands] from hitting their [wives], the women have started to behave offensively and their behaviour is threatening to their husbands.”

The Prophet said, “**Then hit them**”. Then the people hit their wives that night, and many women complained [to Muhammad] about the hitting. The Prophet said, “Tonight, the house of Muhammad was surrounded by seventy women, all of them complaining about being hit. I swear by God, **you will**

not find [those who hit their wives] the best of you” (Chaudhry 2011:430-431, emphasis mine).

These hadiths give the impression that the prophet, although allowing wife-beating, discouraged it and considered it better that men do not beat their wives. However, there is one hadith reporting that the prophet slapped his wife Aisha on the chest, most likely before verse 4:34 was revealed (Al-Arabi, cited in Silvers 2006:176). After the revelation of this verse, the prophet seemed “so disturbed that he often did not want to recite it” (Ibid). Despite the prophet’s moral struggle and his advice to avoid striking, he does not unilaterally prohibit wife-beating, and considers the physical disciplining of wife as a husband’s rights (Chaudhry 2011:433).

Chauhry also notes that the hadiths on the prophet discouraging wife-beating can also be seen as allowing beating, but only in a non-severe way (2011:427). This is also affirmed by the hadith reported on the Hajj sermon, reported by Al-Bayhaqi and Ibn Hisham, in which the Prophet gives general advice to believers:

Fear God concerning women, indeed you take them as a trust from God, and intercourse with them has been made permissible for you by God’s word. Your rights over them are that they do not give your beds to anyone that you dislike. If they do this, then **hit them in a non-extreme manner**. Their rights over you are that you feed them and clothe them in a manner that is according to custom” (Chaudhry 2011:428, emphasis mine).

It seems that referring to the prophetic example as a way of rejecting wife-beating is more complicated than it appears at first. Whereas the Prophet expresses a “moral disapproval” of those men who hit their wives, he also seems to consider the physical discipline of wives as the

right of the husband, and did not punish a man for hitting his wife (Chaudhry 2011:432).

Progressive therefore analyse the reasons for revelation of this verse to clarify the context in which this verse was revealed.

Exegetes of the Qur'an have always relied on *asbab al-nuzul*, or 'the reasons for revelation' in order to establish the historical context in which a Qur'anic verse is revealed (Mubarak 2004:279). Today, feminist scholars use this principle to contextualise verse 4:34 and to uncover the circumstances in which this verse was revealed. Classical scholars Al-Tabari and Al-Zamakhshari refer to a hadith on a woman whose husband had slapped her, so the Prophet wanted to apply *qisas* (retaliation). At that moment, this verse was revealed, after which the Prophet said "We wished something and God wishes something else" (Al-Tabari & Al-Zamakhshari in Mahmoud 2006:538). Although Mubarak points out that this hadith is *mursal* (not directly linked to the prophet) and therefore its authenticity can be contested (2004:280), variations on this hadith have been invoked by many feminist scholars in an attempt to demonstrate the prophet's moral unease with this verse (Silvers 2006:177; Mernissi cited in Scott 2009:67; Chaudhry 2011:424).

Finally, progressives refer to the *maqsad* or objective of verse 4:34 to understand the purpose of the permission for wife-beating. In order to derive the *maqsad* or objective of verse 4:34, it is necessary to look at the Qur'anic verses proceeding and succeeding this verse (Mubarak 2004:281). It is clear from the verses of chapter 4 in the Qur'an that the subject of this chapter is specific guidelines for marriage, divorce and the treatment of women (which is also clear from its name, *Surah Al-Nisa'*, 'the women') (Ibid; Wadud 2006). More specifically, verse 34 and 35 deal with how to resolve or avoid *nushuz*, marital disharmony, rebellion or 'uprising' (Shaikh 1997:11; Wadud 1997:75; Ali 2006:121). Furthermore, both classical and progressive scholars have stressed that verse 4:34 only sanctions wife-beating - in a limited and non-harmful way - as a third step of the solution and a final resort, which should be seen as a restriction of the "excessive, unchecked violence against women" (Al-Razi, in Shaikh 1997:17; Wadud 1997:76). For example, Wadud argues this verse was intended as a limitation of men's abusive behaviour

towards women (Ibid), yet a complete prohibition would be too “naïve, unrealistic and socially disruptive for seventh-century Arabian society (Chaudhry 2013:4; Eisa 1999:24). However, as Chaudhry remarks, firstly, the Qur'an does not consider a complete prohibition of “lying, and cheating” as too unrealistic, and secondly, “how do you beat someone without harming them, physically, psychologically, and emotionally?” (Ibid). The argument that this verse was “progressive for its historical context” is not considered relevant to those scholars – aside from Wadud, although she drastically changes her approach in her second book (2006) – who are aiming to find a meaning of Qur'an 4:34 that is relevant to *this* historical context.

3.2 Reformist approach

Whereas the progressive scholars, as discussed above, place the responsibility for allowing wife-beating and men's 'degree' over women with the exegetes rather than the Qur'anic text, Ali (2006) and Esack (2001) argue that Muslims need to go a step further by acknowledging the androcentric and patriarchal nature of the text itself in order to successfully resolve the internal tensions. Reformists consider verse 4:34 as descriptive of seventh-century Arabian society rather than prescriptive, and therefore see no reason in finding new interpretations that are relevant to contemporary understandings of gender equality and justice. Contrary to progressives, reformists consider it impossible to deny that the Qur'anic text describes men as having some form of authority and responsibility over women and allows wife-beating, but place great responsibility with the community and context in which this verse is read. Therefore, they urge Muslims to take a “conscientious pause” (El Fadl 2001:213), “consciously depart from the letter of the text” (Esack 2001) and say “outright “no” to the literal application of this verse” (Wadud 2006:200). Reformist scholars, more so than progressives, do acknowledge their own responsibility for interpreting the text, and the influence of our contemporary context on their

interpretation. By doing this, reformist avoid a discourse of apologia, which they criticise for leaving fundamentals issues unaddressed (Esack 2001).

Instead of relying on historical precedent to argue for new interpretations, reformist only use it “to guide and not blind” (El Fadl 2001:182). The most significant difference with the progressive, or what some scholars (Esack, Moosa) call ‘apologetic’ approach is that reformists argue that there is little use in engaging in what Moosa labels “hermeneutical acrobatics” (2003:125) in order to find an interpretation for *idribuhunna* that does not mean ‘beat” (Esack 2001). In this classification, I disagree with Chaudhry, who argues that the main difference between the progressive and reformist approach is that the latter do not rely on the Islamic tradition but use “their own critical reasoning and engagement with the Qur'anic text” (2013:186). However, I contend that many of the interpretations Chaudhry labels as ‘reformist’, can still be considered apologetic, as they continue to search for new meaning for the permission to ‘beat’. For example, Bakhtiar (2007:432) translates *idribuhunna* as “go away from them”, whereas Yüksel et al. (2007:17) suggest a translation as “separate from them”. In arguing that any interpretation of *idribuhunna* must be “fair” and “consistent” with the principle of egalitarianism and similar rights of the husband and the wife, expressed in Qur'anic verses such as 2:228 (Ibid:20). Thus, they absolve the Qur'an from any internal inconsistencies, and consequently, from any responsibility for permitting wife-beating – reiterating the progressive approach discussed earlier.

Ali (2006) urges progressive scholars who attempt to read contemporary values of gender equality into the Qur'anic text to “not be as blinded by the commitment to equality as the classical exegetes were by their assumptions about male superiority in marriage and society” (2006:133). Moosa (2003) warns progressives to be careful not to single out a few Qur'anic verses – in similar fashion to classical exegetes – that suggest equal rights between men and women, and assume that the Qur'an advocates gender equality. Invoking a few seemingly

gender-egalitarian verses – for example Qur'an 2:228, 4:124 and 33:35 – in order to interpret the meaning of other verses is “nothing short of hermeneutic acrobatics” (Moosa 2003:125).

Ali remarks that while progressive scholars have criticised classical exegetes of the Qur'an for letting their own presuppositions and context influence their interpretations, they “often commit the same error” (2006:132). Most progressives do not acknowledge the possibility of interpretations that contradict their reading without labelling them as “misreadings” or “misinterpretations” (e.g. Barlas 2004:1, Bakhtiar 2011; Nurmila 2013). Anyone who engages in interpreting the Qur'anic text needs to be aware that understandings of what constitutes justice are subject to personal, historical and social context, and that our contextualised readings of the text will be revised by next generations in their specific context (Esack 2001). Esack also argues that although the Qur'an might not be the prime example for equality and justice – as argued by progressives – it still contains “sufficient seeds” that will enable Muslims achieve gender equality and social justice through Islam (Ibid).

Ali (2006) argues that while God clearly prohibits injustice and oppression, God also permits injustices such as slavery. As both options of either accepting slavery as ‘just’ or arguing that the Qur'an does not sanction slavery (an impossible endeavour) are problematic, we can only conclude that “the Qur'anic text itself requires Muslims to sometimes depart from its literal provisions in order to establish justice” (2006:55). After all, it is not God who “does wrong or oppresses people, but rather people who do wrong (zulm) to their own selves” (Qur'an 3:117, 9:70 etc.; Ibid:149). Silvers (2006:175) also emphasizes that God granted Muslims the burden of “human responsibility”, which allows us to acknowledge that all Qur'anic prescriptions or permissions are necessarily ethical. Therefore, the responsibility for moral decisions ultimate lies with the individual human being (Ibid; Ali 2006:150). I believe that the reformist approach successfully reconciles historical methods and interpretations with the values and realities of the present context (Chaudhry 2006).

Admittedly, many Muslims who struggle to reconcile contemporary notions of gender equality with verse 4:34 might consider a “conscious depart” from the text a step too far. However, I argue that a reformist approach of controversial issues – for example slavery, polygamy or hudud punishment such as lashing, stoning or execution - has proven to be quite successful in the past. I believe that Muslims in Britain, although often still with one foot in the progressive or apologetic approach, are moving more and more toward a reformist approach with regard to the issue of wife-beating, and gender equality in Islam. This will be illustrated through interview responses in the next chapter.

4. Perceptions in British Muslim communities

An often-heard criticism toward Muslim feminists (progressives or reformists) is that their ideas do not filter into grassroots Muslim communities, or that there is a great discrepancy between theory and practical reality. I will use responses from my interviews to demonstrate that firstly, British Muslims are aware of progressive interpretations of Qur'an 4:34 and actively practice them, secondly, that there still are some unresolved tensions as a result of progressive interpretations, and finally, that British Muslims often resort to a reformist strategy by adapting or partly rejecting verse 4:34 (and other verses) to fit their practical situation. For ease of reference, I will use abbreviations for each of my interviewees' names: Khalida Haque (K), Khola Hassan (H), Abdullah Hassan (A) and Khalifa Ezzat (E).

4.1 British Muslims' interpretations of the concepts of Qur'an 4:34

Similar to Wadud (1997) and Hassan (1991), all my interviewees agree that 'men are *qawwamuna* over women' should be interpreted as the man having financial responsibility for his wife (and family), as well as a duty to protect or guard her. H. also argues that Islam embraces the differences between men and women and therefore offers different rights and responsibilities for each:

"Personally, I have trouble with the translation of *qawwamuna* as authority. This "authority" comes from the husband's financial responsibility for his wife and children. I would always interpret *qawwamuna* as responsible or caretaking and providing. The aim of this verse was to protect women when they are vulnerable and unable to work, during pregnancy, nursing and child caring. Men and women are different and have different needs, and therefore should not be treated the same way. Islam does not try to erase gender difference."

Similarly, A. says:

“I don’t see *qawwamuna* as meaning authority, but translate it as ‘protectors and maintainers’ of women in marriage”.

However, it seems that in reality, Muslims struggle with the extent of the husband’s responsibility to protect his wife, as often this can lead to him restricting her and becoming authoritative:

“The husband’s authority derives from his responsibility to provide for his wife. He also has to protect her and take care of her safety for example, the wife should tell him where she is going. [...] The wife must follow her husband, not obey him – however, he is seen as the ‘head’ of the family and usually the decision maker. The marital responsibilities and rights are complementary and mutual. For example, you cannot expect respect if you don’t fulfil your own responsibility.” – E

“The husband can prevent his wife from going somewhere - for example, at night - but the reason he does this is for her safety: after all, women are more vulnerable. I think it can be hard to find the balance in respecting the wife as an individual but at the same time protecting her. The husband is responsible to protect her for her safety, he should not abuse this responsibility to constrain her or order her around. [...]

Sadly, some women still have the idea that they should be slightly obedient to their husband – for example, a woman came to me and said “I know he’s my husband, but...” to which I replied that just the fact that he is the husband does not give him the right to mistreat her or verbally abuse her. The view that just being a man makes you superior is still present in society.” – H

With regard to the verse “and righteous women are obedient (*qanitat*), H. echoes feminist scholars’ argument that ‘obedience’ has often been misunderstood (Al-Hibri 2003; Scott 2009; Chaudhry 2013):

“Obedience has so often been translated as obedience to the husband, but if you look at other verses in the Qur'an, you see that it is intended as obedience to God. We cannot overlook the clear patriarchal influence in classical interpretations of the Qur'an.”

A. argues that the way *nushuz* is interpreted is highly influential for the rest of the verse. Following Wadud (1997) and Abdel Halim (2011), he argues that *nushuz* is used for both men and women in the Qur'an:

“If we translate *nushuz* as disobedience, the question “to who?” arises. As the Qur'an mentions *nushuz* of both men and women, it is not intended as disobedience to the husband, but to God – therefore, neglecting your wifely duties (cooking or cleaning) is not considered *nushuz*. Therefore, I prefer to translate it as ‘anything that a spouse performs which clearly violates the explicit commands of God’, such as not praying or behaving in a non-Islamic way. “

Regarding the three-step solution for a wife’s *nushuz*, A. and K. firstly both stress the importance of clearly defining ‘*nushuz*’ and not taking verse 4:34 as the only guideline for solving marriage problems:

“The problem is that many scholars and Muslims see this verse as the only rule for solving disharmony in marriage, without leaving room for different solutions, or without even asking what someone’s reason for their ‘disobedience’ is. For example, if the wife stops fulfilling her marital responsibilities or is not showing her husband love, the husband should not immediately assume she’s committing ‘*nushuz*’ and move on to the three step solution. There can be so many reasons behind his wife’s actions and behaviour - for example, she might be feeling upset or ill. Communication is so important in marriage. [...] Even if these are the guidelines written down in the Qur'an, that doesn’t prohibit you from seeking other ways of reconciling. Anything is better than using violence.” – A.

“I think that a lot of misunderstandings happen through not communicating enough [...] Both partners can remind each other of their duties (towards God), although you should not ‘correct’ your wife if she is not fulfilling her responsibilities. She’s a grown up woman, not a child!” – K.

Finally, the question arises as to how British Muslim authorities challenge the specific Qur'anic guideline for wife-beating. Do they take the progressive approach by attempting new translations for '*idribuhunna*' through analysing the context of this verse, or do they acknowledge that the Qur'an sanctions beating but reject its application, as reformist scholars have argued?

My interviewees responses generally reflected a progressive approach, as they attempt to find new meanings for verse 4:34 by analysing its context as well as the sayings and actions of the prophet in order to reject the meaning of *daraba* as 'beat'.

For example, A. refers to hadith which explain the context of the revelation and the way the prophet struggled with this verse:

“There are over 52 different meanings for the word *daraba* in the Qur'an, so to find the suitable translation in this verse, we need to examine the interpretations of scholars, the life and statements of the prophet and the overall *maqasid* or aims of Islam to find a relevant meaning. In the context of the revelation, beating was seen as a sign of masculinity and the prophet actually severely limited the right to beat wives: It is reported that he said “those who beat their wives, he is not from me”. Personally, I translate *idribuhunna* as ‘show anger’.” Whenever Muslims criticise me for this ‘new’ interpretation, I say that I am not proposing ‘new’ meanings, as God intended every meaning.”

H. argues that when trying to reconcile the injunction for wife-beating with other Qur'anic verses that describe marriage as built on love and compassion, we need to acknowledge the Islamic principles and the objectives of the Qur'an:

“I don’t think allowing physical violence was the intention of the Qur'an. How can Muslims reconcile love, compassion and respect with allowing wife-beating? Some scholars have tried to interpret *daraba* as a ‘light beating’ or ‘with a handkerchief’ but I believe the meaning should be more symbolic. [...] As there have been about 70 different meanings for the word *daraba* proposed by scholars, which interpretation you choose very much depends on your personal, historical and social context.”

4.2 The practical realities of Qur'an 4:34 in British Muslim communities

After analysing the interpretations and limitations of verse 4:34 for British Muslims, I am interested in knowing how this verse relates to the issue of domestic violence in the Muslim community. Does the injunction for wife-beating in the Qur'an and the husband’s authority or responsibility over his wife lead to domestic abuse in Muslim marriages?

Although research on domestic violence in the UK has demonstrated that 1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse (ONS 2014), little research has been done on the occurrence of domestic abuse in British Muslim communities⁵. A survey by domestic violence charity Nour reveals that 56.4% of the 287 participants had witnessed domestic violence (Nour 2011:2). K. argues from her personal experience as Muslim counselling psychotherapist that “the statistics are in keeping with the general estimates of 1 in 4, or perhaps even higher due to social stigma.” All of my interviewees stated that they regularly get asked about domestic violence, and they acknowledged that it continues to be an issue in the Muslim community. However, all of them were quick to add that domestic violence is an issue that affects the whole of society - Muslims and non-Muslims - and that Islam should not be seen as the cause for domestic abuse in Muslim families:

⁵ For domestic violence in American Muslim communities, see e.g. Ayyub (2000) and Faizi (2000).

“I don’t think the problem is that verse 4:34 exists, rather the way it is invoked as a justification for domestic violence. “Look, it’s in the Qur'an!” is often used as justification, but in reality they don’t abuse women with verse 4:34 in mind. The problem is that they pick and choose verses whenever it fits them. The Qur'an also says to treat women kindly and to respect them, but that is often overlooked. We cannot just blame Islam, there are several other factors that cause domestic abuse.” – K.

A. argues that wife-beating in Qur'an 4:34 is different from our understanding of domestic violence:

“Domestic violence is a human problem, not a religious problem. If a man is abusive and hits his wife, he will do so regardless of whether it is allowed in Islam or not! We should not blame Islam for some people’s behaviour, or give perpetrators the ‘Islamic’ excuse. [...] Even if you would interpret *daraba* to mean ‘beat’, it would still not mean domestic violence, as harming women is not allowed in Islam.”

I believe that the argument that wife-beating is not a form of domestic violence contradicts the very definition of domestic violence⁶ and fits clearly within an apologetic discourse, whereby the Qur'an is absolved from any responsibility for prescribing injustice and violence (Chaudhry 2006).

⁶ “Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional.” UK Home Office (2015).

Two interviewees emphasize the descriptive nature of verse 4:34, and that it allows Muslims to have choices. Muslims also often adapt the Islamic guidelines to their specific situation, suggesting a reformist approach to this verse:

“It is important to realise that not all verses in the Qur'an are intended to be legal and prescriptive, as some verses discuss specific context-related issues. Although I think verse 4:34 is both descriptive and prescriptive, as it gives men the duty to provide, but at the same time it does not limit women from providing. In fact, I encourage Muslim women to be financially independent. [...] “We must remember Islam came along with the intention of bringing justice - especially for women – and we need to stay true to these objectives in order to find new interpretations relevant to Muslims today.” – A.

“We need to make Muslims aware of the fact that they have choices: Islam doesn't force you to hit your wife, nor does it prescribe one single role for each gender. These verses should be seen as guidelines, not rules: for example, I know a few families where both partners are providing, or only the wife. This does not affect their respect for each other.” – H.

I asked interviewees whether they thought there has been a major feminist influence in finding new interpretations in Islam. As I argued earlier, there is a general feeling of reluctance regarding the concept of feminism, which is still seen as a “Western” idea:

“I don't think there is that much influence from feminism, rather I think that people have always adapted religious teachings to their needs and context. Islam provides ways to protect women, and provide for them, whereas often in the West, women are left on their own. Is that equality? Often feminists feel the need to ‘liberate’ Muslim women, but in reality Muslim women are already quite liberated – and strong, independent women have always been part of Islamic history.” – H.

“Often, Muslims in the West say that they don’t want to become “too Western”, but what does that even mean? If “Western” means evaluating your beliefs and challenging damaging traditions – that are not even Islamic – then what is wrong with that?” – K.

Two interviewees expressed the possibility of changing a man’s opinion on domestic abuse through Islam:

“With domestic abuse, I often ask men “Do you call yourself a Muslim?” or “Aren’t you ashamed?” Through evoking their embarrassment and shame they are able to change their attitude, or realize that their actions are wrong.” – H.

“Through the ‘Imams Against Domestic Abuse’ campaign, I cooperate with other imams to challenge domestic abuse through Islam. One of our goals is to prove that Muslims can use verse 4:34 to oppose domestic violence, not to condone it.” – A.

Everyone agreed that Muslim communities need more awareness about the issue of domestic abuse, and about the different interpretations of verse 4:34. Most interviewees expressed hope for the future:

“The problem today is that many Muslims still think that “this is the way it is”. “It’s tradition” is not a valid argument, especially not when domestic abuse is not even an Islamic tradition at all. What is Islamic, on the other hand is to evaluate yourself and to reflect on your actions. [...] Recently, people have started to learn more about their religion, read the sources and be open-minded and critical.” – K.

“I think the problem is that people don’t know enough about religion, or they only know one interpretation. Fortunately, many Muslims have moved away from applying everything literally to finding practical solutions for their situation. It’s necessary to adapt ideas and fatwas to the time and space we are living in, you cannot ignore the influence of your environment.” – E.

“I do believe change is possible. For example, here at the Sharia Council, we have changed the traditional Islamic divorce procedure, which was very unequal: whereas the husband had the unilateral right to divorce, the wife can only ask for *khula'*, which means she has to return her dowry in exchange for a divorce. Now both husband and wife have equal rights to apply for divorce. We have received a lot of praise for this decision, but also some criticism from more traditional Islamic scholars, why simply cannot understand that this is a better and more equal way to handle divorce. I don't know how people can respond to the needs of today's society with such a traditional mind-set.” – H.

I believe that these statements demonstrate that British Muslims are starting to move towards a more reformist approach, through move away from Islamic guidelines and practices to respond to changing understandings of equality and justice.

5. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have analysed the different approaches of Muslim feminist scholars toward the controversial Qur'anic verse 4:34 and the ways they impact British Muslims' daily lives. Through a critical analysis of the arguments presented by both progressive and reformist scholars to support a gender-egalitarian reading of concepts such as wife-beating, women's obedience and men's authority in marriage. I have argued that the progressive approach does not fully resolve the tensions between contemporary understandings of gender equality and justice and the patriarchal context and nature of Qur'an verse 4:34. The reformist approach on the other hand, which argues for a moral conscious break from the application of this verse in today's social and historical context, might prove to be the only way to effectively challenge the ethical tensions arising from this verse. However, through interviews I conducted with people in British Muslim communities, I have realised that reformist Muslims might experience difficulty to find authority for their argument to reject a very straightforward Qur'anic command. I have demonstrated that British Muslims often find themselves torn between the progressive and reformist approaches: they fully recognize that wife-beating is not justifiable – and illegal – in society today and that it should not be justified through Islam, however, they also struggle to find a way to justify the full abrogation of this verse through Islam.

I have demonstrated that British Muslims are aware of feminist approaches to verse 4:34, and actively question classical patriarchal interpretations. Moreover, both progressive and reformist arguments have been used to challenge the practice of wife-beating, the abuse of men's authority in marriage and the contrast between Islamic guidelines for the marital relationship and the reality Muslims find themselves in. For many Muslims couples, the concept of financial responsibility lying with the husband only is simply no longer practically feasible, and Muslim women and men have argued for the choice of financial independence and equal rights in marriage and divorce issues within an Islamic framework.

I believe that more awareness of feminist re-interpretations of verse 4:34 will lead to less domestic abuse justified in the name of Islam, as well as less social and cultural stigma around domestic abuse in Muslim communities. Some innovations have been introduced to adapt certain Islamic practices in the light of changing understandings of gender equality and practical realities- such as the divorce procedure – in British Muslim society. I believe that these developments demonstrate that it is possible to bring about positive change without jeopardizing Islamic beliefs.

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