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Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mulki Al-Sharmani, and Jana Rumminger, eds., *Men in Charge?: Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*, Oneworld Publications, 2014, 304 pp., \$25.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9781780747163.

Men in Charge? emerges from a collaborative project of Musawah, a global “knowledge-building” movement developed by the Malaysian women’s rights group Sisters in Islam.¹ The volume therefore features stalwarts in the field of Islam and gender, such as Amina Wadud, Sa’diyya Shaikh, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini.

This is not a scholarly overview of gender egalitarian interpretive work on Islamic sources. It focuses on the central concepts of *wilayah* and *qiwamah* in the context of spousal experiences, which are at the heart of most concerns for gender inequality. Concerns for equality within marriage in the Islamic legal framework are therefore at the core of this book, and the editors and contributors promise to follow with additional scholarship on the subject.

Though much of the corpus of Islamic law embraces *wilayah* and *qiwamah* as central to the entire structure of gender law and ethics, the contributors to *Men in Charge?* interrogate the centrality of these concepts. Why, they ask, have readings traditionally positioned these concepts as pivotal when the Qur’an doesn’t?

This book addresses a key problem in the development of Islamic law—that of a lack of engagement between feminist discourse and dominant Muslim religious scholarship. Many women activists “in line with mainstream feminism, have long considered engagement with religious ideas and practitioners to be counter-productive” and most Muslim religious scholars are “unaware of...the importance of gender as a category of thought” (4). The contributors to *Men in Charge?* thus “seek to facilitate a systematic and reflective conversation between this [Muslim legal] tradition and Muslim feminism—a conversation that can inform general awareness, change policy and reform laws in the quest for Muslim gender justice” (5).

To its credit, the book project refuses to limit itself to the armchair study and interpretation of texts. In keeping with the best of the Muslim legal tradition, which paid close attention to cultural relevance, the scholarly project is supplemented with, and contextualized in, a participatory Global Life Stories Project in ten countries spanning four continents. This latter project documented and analyzed how *qiwamah* and *wilayah* based practices inform women’s actual life experiences worldwide.

¹ For more information, see: <<http://www.musawah.org/>>, (accessed 5 February 2017).

Key factors in this book are its serious engagement with and its commitment to the Muslim Scriptural and legal tradition. Throughout the book the contributors investigate gender inequalities in the Muslim legal tradition. Much outrage has been generated from traditional reactions to Muslim feminists' alleged lack of grounding in and knowledge of the transmitted corpus of past scholarship. This is not an accusation that can be laid at the door of this project. By its contribution, *Men in Charge?* claims that it is time to transcend the crisis-based preservationist-centric Islamic scholarly project and to open the doors of *ijtihad*. These doors of *ijtihad* were never officially closed, but in practice, they often seem partially closed—at least closed to those who are not equipped with particular identities and affiliations, and with training that is often accessed via those identities and affiliations.

Some scholars and academics have expressed concerns regarding what appear to them an over-emphasis on equality in exegetical work. The emphasis on issues of equality and liberation, they claim, are situated in Western liberal modernity, and are therefore not organic to the corpus of Islamic law. While the precipitating source of gender egalitarian readings in the present day may well be liberalism and Enlightenment-era notions of individualism, this does not affect the inherent worth of the egalitarian project. Much critical ink may be spilled on the particularistic nature of Western liberal notions of individualism and human rights. However, since the project of Islamic law is widely regarded as one that must be relevant to its local and temporal context, undeniably egalitarianism ought to serve as an avoidable shaping factor *even* for those somehow unconvinced of the tawhidic arguments of egalitarianism.

In her chapter, the groundbreaking scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini frames the scope of the entire volume, explaining why research into the uses of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* is essential Muslim feminist work due to cultural shifts and the opening up of potential legal reform. Omaira Abou-Bakr's chapter follows the trail of how notions of male authority and superiority exegetically shape readings of the Qur'anic verse 4:34, from al-Tabari to Muhammad 'Abduh, as well as how contemporary reformist scholarship challenges such readings.

Asma Lamrabet's contribution seeks to excavate the Qur'an's core ethical values as well as to examine the Qur'an's internal meaning of *qiwamah*, demonstrating that the universal Qur'anic message to all human beings is one of doing good and forbidding evil. Ayesha Chaudhry takes Lamrabet's argument further, focusing on the potential and challenge of specific *ahadith* or Prophetic Traditions in relation to women's consent. Sa'diyya Shaikh brings a Sufi perspective, specifically derived from Ibn 'Arabi, to examine how the God-human relationship can serve as a framework for gender relations.

Lynn Welchman's chapter is a comparative study of how *qiwamah* and *wilayah* are (or are not) brought to bear upon practices in such settings as family law in Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. Marwa Sharafeldin analyzes research on Egyptian human rights NGOs to show how activists employ and deploy Islamic law and human rights tenets in efforts to reform Egyptian personal status laws, applying their knowledge of the real-life problems of Egyptian women. Lena Larsen explores European muftis' legal reasoning in the face of changing sociocultural and economic realities that attempts to respond to new realities yet remain solidly within the mainstream comfort zone of hierarchical gender norms. Mulki Al-Sharmani and Jana Rumminger report on Musawah's ten-country Global Life Stories Project in order to illustrate the importance of re-examining the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in light of empirical study of women's actual experiences. In the concluding chapter, Amina Wadud narrates her story of engaging with various readings of verse 4:34 and how such readings embody or challenge gender inequality and male authority.

This is a book and a project that I personally admire and that has benefited from giants in the field of Islam and gender. I have only one rather nitpicky concern that relates to the title. I find the interrogative title potentially confusing: while toting the book, I imagined careless observers saw me as an anti-feminist Muslim, or inferred that Islam itself preached that men *ought to* be in charge! I would recommend a more descriptive title for such a significant work of scholarship.

This is not a book for lay readers seeking a first-time introduction to Muslim feminism. This is a scholarly examination of specific, core issues around the notions of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*—concepts that are fundamental to any analysis of gender in Islam. Analyses of gender that attempt to circumvent a close investigation of these concepts are merely ignoring the elephant in the room, while these concepts, secure in their foundational status, end up dominating the conversation. I particularly appreciated this volume’s multi-level approach in that it does not neglect empirical study of real-life human problems and encounters with the theoretical aspects of Islamic (and other) law. This book is necessary reading for all academic readers with an interest in gender and Islam.

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