Tying the knot: a Feminist/Womanist guide to Muslim marriage in America

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BISMILLAHI AL-RAHMAN AL-RAHIM

"We Can Be Our Own Survivors": African American Muslim Women on Love, Loss, and Life Following the Death of a Spouse

DEBRA MAJEED

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Rosalyn: When she met her husband, Rosalyn[1] was a young woman in love — in love with the religion of Islam. She also was a mother of three and a divorcee. With Rashad, Rosalyn was confident that she could live out the rest of her life as a good Muslim, a good mother, and a good wife with the help of Allah. For nearly four decades, her marriage to Rashad was healthy — they were in tune spiritually, sexually, and financially. Together they produced seven children. When Rashad was taken by ambulance to the hospital following a stroke, Rosalyn prayed that his hospital stay would not be long. Her prayer was answered, but not in the way she hoped; his journey was to progress beyond the earthly realm. Rashad understood his duty to protect and maintain his wife to include the wellbeing of his wife and children while he was alive and after his death. Not only did his life insurance and pension cover his *janazah* (Muslim funeral and burial) expenses, they continued to help support Rosalyn after his death.

Aisha: Conversely, when her husband Ishmael was murdered 14 years after their *nikah*, his sudden departure left Aisha feeling unprepared on multiple, intersecting levels. Just as Malcolm X was certain that the community would assume the care of his family after his death, Ishmael believed the more he worked to cover the expenses of his expanding family, the closer he would be to setting aside a safety net that would protect his loved ones if he was unable to do so. His intent was noble. He was certain he had time. He was wrong. With help from a small insurance policy, relatives and other believers, Aisha was able to meet the financial demands of her husband's *janazah*. But the financial provisions her family needed required Aisha to find a job that would work today in the same way their household's two-paycheck did yesterday.

Willow: Even though theirs was a 12-year union that was not registered with local state authorities, Willow never worried whether her place as her husband's widow would be overlooked or upstaged by anyone. Though she and Omar were struggling financially and living apart at the time of his death — with personal belongings secured in a joint storage unit — she was intent on overseeing preparations for his *janazah*. "We were having some challenges," she explained, "but we *were* married." Unbeknownst to her, however, Omar's adult sons from a previous marriage convinced their resident Imam otherwise. Then, they took

1 Pseudonyms are used and identifying markers have been changed to protect the privacy of my subjects. Some stories reflect the experiences of multiple widows coalesced as an individual journey.

possession of the storage unit and its belongings and denied access to Willow. "The Imam did not support my rights as a wife," she complained. "I felt disrespected by not only [Omar's] sons but also by our Imam. He never investigated the allegations that were made. He just took their word. Here I am at the *janazah* as his wife, at the burial, and not being treated as his wife by our spiritual leader and [Omar's] adult children. I know what the Qur'an says about how widows should be regarded and honored and taken care of, but I didn't have a sense of that." Willow was adamant that her next marriage would be considered legal by both civil and religious authorities. Her plan proved to be fortuitous: her next husband would also precede her in death.

This chapter is about love and loss and advice for those embarking on a marriage, particularly in crafting a solo path following the death of a spouse. While its findings are grounded in the experiences of African American Muslim women who outlived their husbands, what they lived and what they recommend can be instructive for all segments of the American Muslim community as well as for non-Muslims interested in how Muslims navigate end-of-life issues — as individuals and as independent Muslim communities. The chapter began with a trio of vignettes that emerged as part of the six-month data collection period that began in the fall of 2021. With these and other stories from the Muslim Widows Study, we can begin to gain insight into the ways in which the family life decisions of Muslim women are interwoven with the care and support they expect to receive from their husbands as well as their mosque communities, and the levels at which the concept of marriage — and women's roles in it — can be culturally and contextually determined. From here we consider the issue of widow maintenance in Islam, briefly outline the demographics of the study, and explore recommendations African American Muslim widows offer to other women who may lose their husbands, mosque communities, and Muslim leaders. The chapter ends with the overarching conclusion of the study: Misplaced authority for Islamic knowledge and practice leaves women and children vulnerable. Women as well as men must *learn and then live* our responsibilities to each other, especially in our preparation for the protection of our families after our death.

Motivation for research

I became curious about widow maintenance in Islam and the association of the late Imam W. D. Mohammed (IWDM), *rahim Allah alay*, after the circulation of a series of GoFundMe campaigns to support widows

from the community in 2019. Then, as the COVID 19 pandemic began to grip the country, members of our association were wrestling with the loss of leaders whose impact was national. While only a few of these women and men were early victims of the disease, it is what the men left behind, rather than the cause of death of either, that galvanized our community. Even though they were Qur'anic scholars, resident imams, and/or teachers of Islamic fundamentals, these men often left behind financially bereft wives. They needed money to cover the burial of their husbands and/or basic needs, like maintaining the mortgage or purchasing food. A few women lost their homes or were forced to downsize. Others sought government assistance. Still others discovered that their local masjid was ill-prepared to extend monetary aid or other forms of support, largely because its members were unaware of what they could and should do or the best manner in which to proceed. While the study confirmed that some widows could access insurance proceeds and/or family savings (that the widows funded alone and/or with their husbands), the dire conditions of a number of women led me to wonder how the Qur'an addresses the care and maintenance of widows, especially in terms of the obligations of the husband and the responsibilities of the masjid community. These concerns gave birth to the Muslim Widows Study.

Parameters of The Muslim Widows Study

The Muslim Widows Study was conducted between March and December of 2021 and features survey responses of 50 predominantly African American Muslim women affiliated with the leadership of IWDM, in depth interviews with 30 of those women, and survey data from 19 of their Imams about the personal experiences of women who outlived their husbands and the communal reactions to their new circumstances. The study was guided by four objectives, namely to:

- increase the number of husbands and wives who prepare themselves and their families well, Qur'anically and materially, to deal with the loss of a spouse;

- increase the number of wives who prepare themselves well, Qur'anically and materially, to live faithfully to Allah in the absence of their husbands;

- increase the number of masjid communities that heighten their engagement in the Qur'an and available resources to educate and

empower current and future generations about our individual and communal obligations; and to

- move the issue of widow maintenance from the private to public sphere as an obligation of both individuals and community.

Their advice to other women ranged from the theological ("Seek Allah's mercy and blessings") to the practical ("know what's going on in YOUR house, with YOUR finances. Make sure you have YOUR stuff together"). The life experience of widows can be quite diverse, regardless of the type of marriage that they have — whether dual spousal union or multiple-wife marriage, unions that are registered with the state in which they live and those that are unregistered, known only to members of their religious community. In all, Qur'anic knowledge and practical awareness can easily influence where the death of a husband leaves a widow along the widow-maintenance spectrum — that is, whether a widow finds herself at the positive-experience end, occupying the angry and dissatisfied end, or somewhere in between.

Widow Maintenance as Taught in Prophetic Tradition and Local Communities

The Qur'an and the prophetic tradition show care for widows. The Qur'an specifically tells bereaved wives to observe a post-widowhood waiting period (Q 2:234) and commands their husbands to provide widows with a year's housing and support (Q 2:240). Since obviously a deceased person can't themselves do this, it's a command to the community or (other) heirs to provide for the widow from the decedent's estate. Unfortunately, the presence of an "estate" left by a deceased husband is extremely rare, the study found. That's why many Muslims associated with the leadership of IWDM interpret this directive as one with which men, in particular, look out and care for widows, offering any support possible, especially with household demands. At least one hadith of the Prophet Muhammad goes further with the community responsibility. The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said: "One who lends effort to the widows and the poor is like one waging jihad in the way of Allah, or one who regularly prays at night and fasts during the day."[2] But the "how" of applying the Qur'anic directive is one of the unexpected challenges that widows may encounter. "The masjid supported me, they aided me financially, but in terms of emotional

2 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5353; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2982.

support, no," said Qaedah, the youngest participant in the study whose second marriage ended when her husband died after eight years, "surrounded by the brothers of their community." "Lots of brothers feel like they have to marry a sister to help her," Qaedah continued — "that seems wild to me. I have a son, and, dang, I need somebody to pretty much be a mentor to him because you know how important it is for young men to have a male in their life."

Male support, commanded by the Qur'an, was also among the communal expectations of Khadijah, a community activist and widow after 13 years of marriage, whose anger is still raw:

> *I'm very active in the community: I raised more money for the community than anyone I know. But, not one brother asked me if I needed anything even though brothers are supposed to take care of widows. Not one asked me 'do you need your grass cut? Do you need anything?' Nothing. Had I not had my [financial] affairs in order, it would have been [an especially] sad time for me. I was just surprised at the lack of response, as though I had not worked in the community for 30 years.*

Knowing what the Qur'an says and acting on that knowledge represent opposite ends of a wide spectrum. Yasmeen, whose husband died after 45 years, attends a masjid that shared teachings about widow maintenance frequently, "but talking about it and giving that information to people is totally different from internalizing it and doing it," she explained. "The community was not that kind to me. I've talked to several widows; they had the same problem I had. It's like they just forgot about us. There's just a couple of brothers in my community who see to it if I need anything. One of the brothers was my husband's enemy. On the day of his *janazah*, the brother came to me and said 'anything you need, call me.' He has done everything he said he would do."

Still, even with guidance from scripture and the prophetic tradition, teachings on widow maintenance are rare, the study found. Regardless of the length of their marriages, only a couple of widows indicated that they were familiar with the rulings on widows or that they had heard a message on the topic during Friday congregational prayers or Sunday afternoon lectures — the primary outlets for Islamic knowledge in their masjids. We hear about the waiting period for widows to remarry, but not about their care and support after a husband's death, at least "not in a specific sense," said Wakeelah, whose husband died after 43 years of marriage. "No one ever puts it [care for widows] in a practical

sense — this is how you do this, that." Wakeelah's comments echo the sentiments of the majority of study participants, and also are consistent with responses to a survey completed by 19 Imams. Only five of the male respondents indicated that they have addressed widow maintenance at least once in the past three years. Their lack of attention to the issue could be tied to the belief expressed by eight Imams that their communities already are "very familiar" or "familiar" with the individual and communal responsibilities of widow maintenance.

Findings of the Muslim Widows Study suggest that a wide discrepancy exists between what masjid leaders think their communities know and practice and the lived realities of most women who outlive their husbands. In particular, widows contend that women (and men) must become more proactive and take the reins of their own self-care and obligations, in what most have outlined as a two-step process, involving spiritual obligations and the practical treatment of widows, from theological advice to "Seek Allah's mercy and blessings" to the practical guidance to "know what's going on in YOUR house, with YOUR finances. Make sure you have YOUR stuff together."

Qur'anic Education and Application: Key Predictor of Widow Maintenance

First, Qur'anic education. When widows advocate this, they mean, more women must read and understand the Qur'an for themselves and then teach the next generation, with the realization that knowledge alone is insufficient. "I had a very intelligent husband," Rahmah said of her spouse of 30 years. If anyone knew anything [about the Qur'an], it would be him. And, still he fell short." "That's why teaching our children and theirs and providing them with more and better role models is so important," added Michealla. "But we need to teach ourselves the rules on widow maintenance as if the topic is part of attention given to the development of a family structure," interjected Dorothy, whose parents attended to the medical needs of Elijah Muhammad. "I've been around [engaged in the community] since I was 16 years old. I'm now 80, and I have seen people who give more respect to the dead than to the living."

By linking widow maintenance to family discourse, Dorothy provides an apt transition to the second step in the educational process, whereby attention to a spouse's personal needs and wishes begins at the premarital counseling stage and/or before the signing of the marriage contract and continues through to the acquisition of enforceable end-

of-life directives and control of marital resources. "It's not just about getting married," offered Khadijah, "but about getting married well." She employs a reference to nature for clarification (though these written words do not convey the passion with which she spoke them):

> *There is a particular bird and the male and female interact like this: the male is responsible for building a nest. The female sits and watches the preparation of this nest. When the male bird feels that this nest is prepared, he flies away. The female bird goes to the nest and begins to peck at it; then she shakes it, and she does everything she can to see if this nest is secure. Why? Because she wants to see if this is a place she can lay her eggs. If Allah gives the instinct to the female in nature, we can teach sisters to be responsible for you and your eggs. We've gone to the men and asked them why they are not doing their job, and they have shuffled and given us Islamic conversation. We must demand more. We must save ourselves, beginning with the planning of the marriage.*

Khadijah's insistence on self-preservation points to another 21st-century family dynamic: the likelihood of children from previous unions, as noted with Willow's experience at the start of this chapter. As I write, a new GoFundMe campaign is being organized by relatives of Muhammad, who died in a car accident, leaving behind his widow and seven-year-old child. Though his father reported that his son was "born Muslim," Omar was raised in a Christian context following the divorce of his parents. Thus, as the date for Omar's burial neared, his father informed the community that "we will respect all protocols relative to their standards and procedures for funeralizing the deceased." In other words, had Omar planned for and executed legal documents for his end-of-life decisions; such preparation would not limit his Muslim family's options to offering the funeral prayer at his grave.

Sometimes a family's lack of planning can lead to litigation that continues after death. This was the situation in which Sumayah was living when her husband died after seven years of marriage. Though they bore no children together, Clarence was survived by four adult children from a previous marriage.

> *My relationship with his children was completely damaged. My husband unfortunately missed the signature line on the health care directive, and his children and I had different opinions on my husband's health care treatment. We were in probate court for almost the duration of his hospital stay. It was just an ugly battle, and we're still not speaking to this day and*

I'm still in probate for the death benefits he left me. His children claimed falsely that I changed my name and removed the name of his ex-spouse.

As late as 14 months after the death of Clarence, Sumayah was still petitioning the legal system for death benefits. Her experience has convinced Sumayah that women who are about to get married or are already married to men with adult children insist their husbands complete at least five tasks:

- One, express his wishes at a family meeting attended by all his beneficiaries.
- Two, place his wishes in writing and distribute the notarized document to his beneficiaries at the meeting or as soon thereafter as possible.
- Three, clarify with his fiancée/wife what happens to her — in terms of marital property/support — if he precedes her in death.
- Four, keep any accounts belonging to his fiancée/wife separate from accounts to which other relatives have access.
- Five, make sure all his documents are signed.

When Michealla affirmed the importance of role models above, she could have easily pointed to her own experience. In fact, her journey to widowhood is a model for what can happen when everything falls into place at just the right moment. He would tell me that "I want to stay with you but my body just won't let me," she recalled of Luqman's final days. By the time her husband died in 2019, he and Michealla had engaged in several conversations about end-of-life decisions over the course of their 20-plus-year marriage. And, they acted upon those conversations. "I was determined NOT to be an old woman in some minimum wage job," she explained. "Even with his love and promises," Michealla said, "I knew that I had to look out for my rights." Their follow-through involved a two-step process. First, they put aside funds individually and collectively to cover final expenses. Second, they positioned Michealla to start a new business and commute between her home base and another state with the proceeds from the life insurance policy that Luqman carried on himself and maintained. Leaving her in good shape financially was so characteristic of her husband, Michealla believes, because "he had built a reputation and a life that was exemplary." Apparently, Luqman was a

good money manager, too. In fact, what surprised Michealla the most was "finding out that I didn't have to pay the house note until six months after he passed!"

Given the stories she has heard of the challenging experiences of too many widows, the term "exemplary" might be an apt description of Michealla's masjid community as well. Luqman died while they visited family in the South. Even though she had to arrange and cover the costs of transport for his remains to be returned to their home state for burial, Michealla reported that her community stayed in touch, ready to assist with whatever she needed. "Everyone was at my disposal," she explained. At every stage, "the presence of community was extremely heartfelt. They [his community] loved him because he dearly loved his community."

Preparation and financial planning can reduce the stress that widows (and widowers) may experience as they move into "survival" mode. "We planned for him preceding me in death," said Aisha, whose husband, Maurice, died in 2018 — ending their 42-year-union. "All I had to do was write a check. We were people of meager means and had each other's best interests at heart." Aisha and Maurice were introduced by a mutual friend, and joined the [original] Nation of Islam during the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, when "doing for self" was a nationwide priority — one that should be replicated today.[3] As Aisha put it:

> *We probably could do a better job of preparing financially. The fact that we have to resort to GoFundMe accounts to bury somebody and pay the day-to-day expenses of their widows tells me that it's never too late to start the financial planning process.*

Some women advise widows to become entrepreneurs and collaborate. "I encourage widows to go into business together and make money to help sustain themselves," said Khalidah, a widow after 29 years of marriage.

Proactive self-reliance and sister-to-sister education is a major concern for Khadijah, who requested a life insurance policy on her husband payable to her as part of her dower or gift to the bride from the groom. As

3 I distinguish the Nation of Islam organized in the 1930s and whose architect was Elijah Muhammad from the contemporary movement led by Louis Farrakhan.

she put it, "I have experienced my community's response to me. What I'm learning from this study is that we've gone to the men and asked them why they are not doing their job. They really shuffled and gave us Islamic conversation, which is normally what they do. What's imperative is that sisters are taught that they need to look out for themselves; *you* have to be responsible for life."

Conclusion

Over a two-week period in December 2021, I organized Zoom meetings with study participants to share findings. I wanted them to be the first to hear each other's comments and have the opportunity to add. They were not surprised by the study's findings; indeed, one sister offered this consensus comment: "Everybody is suffering through the same thing. It's amazing how you might be going through different stages but going through the same process."

To a large extent, the attitudes and conditions that these and other widows encounter reflect experiences that any male or female may grapple with at some point in their life. Ultimately, widow maintenance is, to these women, an acknowledgement of sorts. When individuals and communities address their obligations, the message sent, in the words of one widow, is this: "They [the community] knew how much he meant to me, and how much we meant to each other." Maryam, who was widowed after 38 years and is now remarried, says, "That was my experience, but, then, I was one of the lucky ones." As widows, women become aware of "all that pressure on you because you have to survive," added Khadijah. "My husband made sure that I didn't have to make survival moves."

Editor's note:

Our beloved colleague Dr. Debra Majeed passed away from cancer before she had the chance to bring her full vision for this essay to fruition. Among other things, in keeping with her always-constructive approach, she had hoped to include recommendations for imams and community leaders in addition to the advice below for communities. While we hope that her research for the Muslim Widows' Study will find fuller expression in other publications, we believe strongly in the relevance of her work, which appears here with only light editing for clarity, for Muslims, especially Muslim women, at all life stages. The hard-won wisdom of the widows she interviewed can guide those embarking on adventures in matrimony. We are tremendously grateful for her scholarship and her life.

Advice to masjid communities

- Educate community members about WHAT and HOW to prepare.
- Become familiar with non-Muslim extended family.
- Unpack the teaching that "Allah will provide." Address the myth that "You don't have to prepare for your passing."
- Establish a committee to work with widows until remarriage that includes married couples that might extend invitations to social events.
- Establish a fund to financially support older, unmarried women (and men).
- Train community members on how to approach/assist widows. Be willing to check on children.
- Be willing not to just ask "What can we do?" — but do it.