

Gender and Sexuality: An Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRAK

Rencana ini memberi pendedahan mengenai gender dan seksualiti menerusi perspektif agama Islam. Secara khasnya, perspektif wasatiyyah adalah amalan yang mengambilkira situasi kontemporari penganut Islam dan tuntutan masyarakat sekelilingnya. Merujuk kepada al-Quran dan hadis, perhubungan gender seperti yang diturunkan untuk amalan umat Islam akan diterangkan. Antara perkara yang disentuh ialah perhubungan suami-isteri, cerai, poligami dan cara pergaulan dan pemakaian.

Kata kunci: Gender, seksualiti, Islam, Wasatiyyah, al-Quran, hadis

ABSTRACT

This article deals with issues of gender and sexuality from the perspective of religion of Islam, specifically the wasatiyyah approach, which is a moderate trend that takes into account the current situations of Muslims and their relationship with others. By referring to al-Quran and hadith, the relationship between men and women as described in the two sources is analyzed in detail. Issues of interest include husband-wife relationships, marriage and divorce, polygamy, and the etiquettes of socializing and clothing for men and women.

Key words: Gender, sexuality, Islam, Wasatiyyah, al-Quran, hadith

INTRODUCTION

Gender and sexuality are parts of the natural identity of human beings that has been given ample attention within socio-cultural and political studies. Religious studies contribute towards clarifying the positions of various religions on gender-related injunctions, justifying concepts and interpreting texts that address human sexuality. Human males and females are each endowed with sets of features some of which are largely identical, while others are distinguishing characteristics. Certain features of gender apparently affect the sexuality of both the male and the female to varying degrees, while socio-cultural factors influence sexual behaviour, drive, activities and orientation, as well as gender relation, dress, rights and the sense of responsibility.

As a social phenomenon, religion exercises great influence on social practice where natural gender identity and sexuality are concerned. While some traditional religions have little difficulty in adjusting to social changes, Islam has aimed at guiding changes in gender relationships and human sexuality. This position leads in some cases to tension in Muslim societies. The attention accorded issues of gender and sexuality in modern socio-cultural, political and religious discourse is evidence of the need to clarify the position of Islam on such matters, provide reassurance for its believers and treat emerging questions.

It is undeniable that modern issues on gender and sexuality are largely influenced by Western socio-cultural practices. Some current views and practices on sexuality are not consistent with traditional Western Christian values, and so it should be no surprise either that many of them are not consistent with Islamic values. On the other hand, it is difficult to ignore the influence of modern Western socio-cultural views and practices on various aspects of life and on the intellectual engagement with world cultures and religion. Islam and its believers are not exempted from this, since normative Islamic values may not be totally adhered to by Muslims, while local cultural norms and activities may not conform to all basic principles of Islam.

Muslim scholars contribute extensive literature and *fatawa* (religious decrees) to address gender and sexuality issues by taking varied positions, be it *Salafiyyah* (classical Islamic trend), liberal or *Wasatiyyah*. A liberal contribution is essentially influenced by Western perspectives (Salman 1997: 24-33; Bouhdiba 1985) and the *Salafiyyah* contribution is influenced to some degree by cultural practices in the Arab Peninsula. This paper, however, intends to present a *Wasatiyyah* perspective that offers a moderate position on gender and sexuality issues, a trend that upholds the teaching of Islam without being influenced by cultural practices in its understanding of the al-Quran and *hadith*. In order to achieve its objectives, the paper presents brief Islamic views on gender and sexuality and analyses selected *Quranic* verses and prophetic sayings on some problematic issues related to the topic. Since some texts may be long, the analysis will focus on relevant phrases, with the hope that these will not be seen as texts isolated from their contexts.

THE ISLAMIC *WASATIYYAH* PERSPECTIVE

Islamic *Wasatiyyah* is a moderate trend in the addressing of issues and challenges affecting Muslims. It calls for understanding the established and consensus injunctions of Islam in its totality, taking into consideration the following factors: the current situations of Muslims and their relationship with others, rules of human society and purposes of *Shari'ah*, the need for the simplification of *da'wah* and religious decrees, and the need for maintaining balance between established rules and social changes, among many others. (al-Qaradawi 1995: 220-227)

The Wasatiyyah perspective on gender and sexuality is presented in works by both the late Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali and Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Considering the fact that feminist issues have dominated discussions on gender and sexuality, al-Ghazali (1990) presents a comprehensive view on woman issues, criticizing the influence of local and foreign traditions, while al-Qaradawi handles the topic in many of his books, lectures and fatawa. Both scholars as well as others of the same trend aim at refuting the views and practices of the extremists and liberalists on woman issues. Al-Ghazali (1990: 15-16) writes:

Islam maintains equality between man and woman where many rights and responsibilities are concerned, and in the case of certain differences, there is recognition of the origin of human nature and related differences in functions. The basis is the Almighty Allah's saying: "And their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: "Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: ye are members, one of another" (*Quran* 3:195), and his saying: "Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily, to him will We give a new Life, a life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions." (*Quran* 16:97) There are traditions instituted by people, which are not commanded by the Lord of the people, and which relegated cultural and social positions of woman and kept ways of dealing with her in the darkness of earlier *jahiliyyah*."

Al-Qaradawi says:

Two opposite types of people have been unfair to women: The Westernized type of people who wants to impose Western traditions, which include decadence and lack of values - especially religious, and deviation from normal nature to stay away from the rightly guided path that Allah has sent prophets and holy books to show to the people, and calls them to abide by. The second type includes those who force other traditions on women, but these are the traditions of the East not the West. Those traditions are given a religious colour. Those people who made those claims made them from their sides; based on something that they understood, or a view that they initiated or preferred because it suits their view on women and their disrespect for her, her religion, her brains or her behaviour.

QURANIC AND PROPHETIC DIRECTIVES

It is essential in discussing issues of gender and sexuality from the *Quranic* and prophetic directives to distinguish texts with definite meanings (*qat'iyyah*) from those with hypothetical meanings (*zhanniyyah*). The definite texts may not be great in number, but instructions therein are sound and clear, and the hypothetical texts on the contrary are subject to interpretations according to varying understandings of historical events that surround implementation, selection of jurist opinions and traditions of communities. Al-Quran provides directives on several issues related to gender and sexuality, ranging from equality, identity, functions, needs, rights, responsibility, sexual interaction and

relation. It is, therefore, unfounded to assume that it pays greater attention to sexual aspects of marriage, most especially to the sexual satisfaction of husbands. Attested to this fact is that *Quranic* chapters dedicated to discuss wide-ranging issues on women, such as *al-Nisa'*, *al-Nur*, *al-Talaq*, *al-Mujadilah*. Other chapters such as *al-Baqarah* and *al-'Ahzab* dedicate many verses to gender and sexuality. However, it is natural to take great care when dealing with sexuality, due to the fact that human beings are capable of using their intellect to control their sexual drive and activities, and that they are the only creatures that engage in sexual relationship beyond the physical capacity for reproduction.

Among various verses that generate discussion on this topic is verse (4:34) which addresses the function of *qawamah* (management and maintenance) by men on the affairs of women in family relationship, and which contains a directive on dealing with wifely rebellion, which includes permission to employ beating as a last resort when other measures have failed in bring her back to loyalty. al-Quran (4:34) quotes:

Men are the *protectors and maintainers* of women (affairs), because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. 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 return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all).

Al-Ghazali (35-36, 154-157) reacts to the popular understanding and implementation of *qawamah*, and views that the predicament of the religion is in people who alter the discourse from its right direction, and elevate a weak *hadith* to the position of clear verses and clear sounding *hadith*. He believes that whoever has true comprehension of the holy al-Quran will know that there is general equality between men and women, and that if man is given certain rights, that will be in lieu of heavy responsibility, and not as a mere preference. The *qawamah* of man in a family does not mean a loss of original equality, just as the submission of a people to their government does not mean subduing and subjugation. The social order has its natural requirement, which does not leave a place for excess or for the extreme in its interpretation. The *qawamah* is a responsibility before it can become an honour, and a sacrifice before it can become a nobility, and it is not subduing. To him, the position of man to woman and vice versa is rightly described in verse (2:187): "They are your garments and ye are their garments." And that in a Muslim home, there are limits prescribed by Allah (*Hudud Allah*), which are referred to six times in two verses of *al-Baqarah* (2:229-230).

In Islam, there are restrictions on a man beating his wife, which existed in traditional earlier Arab society, and the Prophet condemned and warned against beating a wife, and commended those who did not beat their wives (Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 1830). He disapproved of any beating that caused scars on the body

and of any form of abuse of a woman. There are other linguistic and cultural implications to the understanding of this verse as well. Another verse is on the interest of a man to replace a wife with another (*'istibdal*) in verse (4:20-21), which is permitted under the condition that man should not withdraw whatever he has given to his present wife:

“But if ye decide to take one wife in place of another, even if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, take not the least bit of it back; would ye take it by slander and a manifest wrong? And how could ye take it when ye have gone in unto each other and they have taken from you a solemn covenant?”

A contention here is that why should a man be given an open ticket to change a wife? This replacement is a solution to the problem of marrying more than four wives as practised before Islam, and the inability to marry more than one wife where there is problem with the existing wife. The verse should not be read in isolation from human behaviour and nature, i.e. disloyalty, loss of beauty, inability to attain sexual satisfaction and financial capability, as well as rights to separation, and the control of Islam over gender relation and sexuality.

The above verse is connected to husband rights to separation (*talaq*). It is not unconnected to verse (2:229) where a wife is also granted rights of separation from her husband (*khul'*): “There is not blame on either of them if she give something for her freedom.” Here, she is also allowed to sacrifice financially for her own liberation. The husband is not supposed to withdraw any given favour in case he seeks a divorce: “It is not lawful for you, (men), to take back any of your gifts (from your wives)”, while the wife will have to return what the husband has given her when she initiates separation.

Polygamy (*ta'addud*), often viewed as a practice that favours men, is explained in verse (4:3). Although polygamy is allowed for men in order for them to meet their natural sexual needs and to contribute in solving some social problems, it is restricted to the ability to be fair and to maintain equality among fellow wives. “But if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then (marry) only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess.” However, equality among fellow wives is measured by religious directives and cultural norms, despite the fact that total equality may be impossible, most especially in matters to do with love, due to personal characteristics of each wife. Al-Quran (4:129) says: “Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire: but turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air).”

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE

It is difficult to deny cultural and linguistic influences on the views and practices of Muslims concerning gender and sexuality, as well as their reaction to them in a modern context. This influence, however, is not restricted to traditional Arabian

culture, and Muslim regional cultures and adopted foreign cultures also add to that. Al-Ghazali (1990: 58, 174-177) frowns at the traditional interpretation of *qawamah*, which equates it with traditional practices of political or tribal control. He condemns the superficial understanding of wife-beating allowed by al-Quran as a last measure to save a family relationship from collapsing due to the wife's disloyalty. To him, such an understanding contradicts *Quranic* and sound *hadith* directives on mutual respect and coexisting between couples. Such a traditional practice and understanding of verse (4:34), as well as Western perspectives, seem to drive some scholars to claim that beating (*darb*) in this verse is metaphoric, and that it indicates "abandoning" at home and not actual beating (Abu Suleyman 2001). However, this corrective measure of beating should not equal abuse, and should be taken within general contexts on gender relationship (al-Ghazali, 1990:174-177). Al- Quran (4:34) itself directs: "But if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance)." A verse on the divorce process says: "Either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them, (or) to take undue advantage." (2:231) The Prophet suggested tenderness in dealing with women and the need for kindness: "Take heed of the [best way of] dealing with women" (Bukhari, hadith no. 4787).

Cultural influence is present in interpreting a phrase in verse (4:34) which justifies men's management of affairs of women in a family, asserting that it comes because of men's elevated position in society over women and with the payment of dowry, without considering some linguistic features of a sub-phrase that contains a masculine pronoun, and without considering conventional practices of family maintenance (Ibn Kathir, 1401H, al-Quran 4:34). The impact of language on interpreting texts related to gender and sexuality might have pushed 'Umm Salamah, a woman companion of the Prophet, to protest masculine linguistic references (phenomenon of *taghlib*) in *Quranic* verses on events of *hijrah* and matters of faith. "O messenger of Allah, I don't hear Allah mentioning women in *hijrah* events. Then verse (3:195) was revealed – "Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: ye are members, one of another" – to reassure female companions (al-Tirmidhi, hadith no. 2949).

Using masculine references (pronoun or word) also influences the interpretation of some verses and prophetic sayings. Al-Ghazali (1990: 69) refers to a man who was forbidding women from attending the mosque because he took a phrase out of context in verses (24:36-37) which indicates that some men are worshipping Allah in houses of worship. "In them is He glorified. In the mornings and in the evenings, (again and again), by men whom neither traffic nor merchandise can divert from the Remembrance of Allah..." He criticizes this blind interpretation of the texts, and reports bewilderment among women of this surface understanding of al-Quran, questioning their understanding of other verses that use the word *rijal*, men, such as (33:23) "Among the Believers are men who have been true to their Covenant with Allah", asking whether trustworthiness and fulfilment of promises should be restricted to men alone.

Meanwhile, cultural norms are essential in determining the meaning of the phrase, “that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof,” in al-Quran (24:31). Al-Qaradawi, refuted an assertion that head hair is included in ornaments or parts of the body that a woman may not have to cover for strangers. He was of the view that consensus is that woman hair is part of her *‘awrah*, and that it has to be covered, and he cited different opinions on limits of the allowed parts of the body that can be exposed to strangers. Some of the opinions justify the need to cover the hair and other parts with the need to limit sexual attraction.

Cultural norm is also essential in determining the rights and responsibilities of couples as indicated in a clause in al-Quran (2:228) “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them.” The term (*al-ma’ruf*) is what is culturally acceptable, and the term (*darajah*) should be understood as a degree for men above women in rights and responsibilities, and not as an “authority” as culturally interpreted in some exegeses and translations. Meanwhile, al-Ghazali (1990: 33) summarizes the cultural situation of women in traditional Middle Eastern Arab societies and says:

The woman in our society has no cultural or political role. She does not involve [herself] in educational programs nor in social set-ups. She has no place inside the mosques nor in venues of jihad. To mention her name is an insult, to see her face is prohibited, her picture is a shame, and her first and last function is to prepare food and prepare for bedding.”

GENDER RELATIONS

Gender is the natural identity of human beings, who are created as men and as women. “O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single Person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women” (4:1). They are to regenerate into tribes and nations, and have mutual acquaintance. “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other.” (49:13). They are also honoured: “We have honoured the sons of Adam.” (17:70) They are physically and psychologically prepared to engage in guided spiritual, social and sexual relationships, which distinguishes them from the beasts.

In Islam, marriage is a natural and spiritual relationship between man and woman. While recognizing biological, social, psychological and material benefits of marriage, Islam recognizes the function of reproduction and the regeneration of the human race, as well as the spiritual function of the offspring. Allah says: “And Allah has made for you mates (and Companions) of your own nature, and made for you, out of them, sons and daughters and grandchildren.” (16:72). The

Prophet advises: "Marry the fertile loving wife, as I will [be] proud of your number to other nations." (Abu Dawud, hadith no. 1754).

A marriage engagement between man and woman is among the great signs of Allah where the purpose is to create tranquillity and enjoy love and blessings of Allah. "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts)" (30:21). However, the marriage contract in Islam bears these implications: it must be permanent as humanly as possible; it must be a mutual consent of both husband and wife; it must be with reasonable dowry; and it must be with equal rights and obligations; and each spouse complements the other socially, psychologically and spiritually.

The gathering, meeting or mixing of men and women in society are natural, and Islam looks at that in the light of the objectives or the benefits, and as such some general guidelines are to be observed. These include keeping eyes lowered politely between the two parties, sticking to respectable Islamic attire that covers the prescribed '*awrah*, (24:31), (33:59), avoiding *khalwah* (sitting alone with a woman without a *muhrim* in a secluded place), abiding by Islamic behaviour in talking, (*Ahzab*:32), and movement, (24:31), and rejecting seductive make-ups or clothes. In most of these conditions, attention is normally directed to women, due to their powerful sexual fascination, but men are not exempted from some of them. Al-Qaradawi (2004) notes in a decree on the mixing of men and women:

The meeting of men and women is not forbidden but is acceptable or required if the objective was participation in a noble cause, related to useful knowledge or good deeds, or a beneficial project or a necessary '*jihad*', or otherwise of the activities that need combining the efforts of the two sexes and cooperation between them in the planning, direction and execution. This does not mean that the barriers between them should melt and the legislative barriers related to meetings between two parties be forgotten.

GENDER RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITY

Islam does not discriminate between human beings on the basis of gender, and different functions in life does not mean the elevation or relegation of one or the other sex. There are general rights for living in dignity, the rights to have life provision and the social and civil rights. As man has the right to choose his future partner, Islam gives woman the right to choose her own life partner. "The woman that is to remarry shall not be engaged until she approves it, and the virgin girl shall not be given out in marriage until she allows." (al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 4741) The Prophet was reported to have given back the right to choose husband to a girl who complained that her father forced her into a marriage.

Also, it is the right of a woman to appear in beautiful costume, once she is reasonably perfect and is morally upright. It is also her right to have a social relationship with others, and participate in managing and building her community. As a husband has the right to seek divorce, a wife also has the same right, for

different reasons and procedures, and both of them have rights to sexual satisfaction. The Prophet warns women: "If a man invites his wife to his bed, and she refuses to join him, the angels will continue to curse him until next morning" (al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 4794). He advised Abdullah bin `Amr bin al-`As who observes prayer through the night: "And your wife has the right on you. So assign every one his or her due rights" (al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 1837). Al-Quran (2:228) declares: "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them," and this includes sexual satisfaction.

It is also the right of a woman to assume a leadership position in society, and the *hadith* that was quoted as indicating failure of a woman in leadership role in a people, was found to have been taken out of context. The *hadith* was about putting the daughter of the Persian emperor on the throne after the demise of her father. The prophet comments (al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 4073): "They will never triumph, a people that submit their leadership to a woman", referring to the daughter of the emperor. This is also unconnected with a *hadith* that describes women as being deficient in religion and cognition by equalling two female witnesses to a male in certain judicial proceedings and in documenting business transactions, and natural menstrual periods during which they are exempted from some rituals. (al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 293)

However, rights do not come without responsibility, and in Islamic marriages, both the husband and wife have joint and specific responsibilities. A husband is responsible for the protection, happiness and maintenance of his wife according to his means and resources. He is to avoid unlawful sexual intercourse with her during her monthly period and anal sex, to keep his wife honourably or to free her from the bond of marriage honourably (2:222-242). The wife is to obey her husband in matters which are not against the principles of Islam, nor harmful to her or put unreasonable hardship on her, be attentive to the comfort and well being of her husband, and be considerate in her demands. She should consult him in dealing with people outside the family, take care of her husband's possessions, and not deny herself to her husband without any genuine reason. Both of them have obligations to exchange help, understanding, forgiving, love, protection, and flexibility.

GENDER EQUALITY AND INEQUALITY

Islam addresses gender issues as the coexistence of two equal partners, in which each partner complements the other. It is not strange that the Islamic point of view contains some points of inequality between male and female, since there are natural and psycho-cognitive differences between genders. There is difference in natural identity, bodily delicacy, sexual urge and reaction, functions and implications of reproduction, and hormones. There is also disparity in the ability to influence others, in the response to stimuli, flexibility, degree of dependency, interest to surrender, receptiveness, and concentration.

Al-Khisht (1984) elaborates on Islamic perspectives of gender equality and inequality, most especially in marriages and related issues of sexuality. He also discussed issues of equality as presented in al-Quran; the value of humanity (57:39), dignity and honour (49:13), a good deed and its rewards (3:159), personal and public responsibility (4:32), (16:97), (4:124), (9:71), (9:67-68), punishment for extramarital relationship (5:38), (24:2), civil rights (in the selection of a partner for marriage, and in learning and teaching), the expression of opinion (58:1), and rights to the termination of a marriage (*talaq* for a husband, and *khul'* for a wife, involving different procedures).

However, Islam recognizes inequality in some points based on natural and psycho-cognitive traits; some duties of worship where women are exempted from prayer, fasting, performing *tawaf* and holding al-Quran during menstruation and postnatal bleeding, some legal rules (such as less responsibility for women, and more respect and recognition of her nature and needs), and inequality in maintenance, where a woman is not to be responsible for any financial burden for the family, and every thing rests on the man, even during the waiting period of divorce, (al-Quran 65:6-7, & 2:33), she can even use the man's money for an acceptable normal family maintenance without his knowledge. Inequality also exists in inheritance (4:11-12, 176), witness where al-Quran 2:282 requires in the documentation of loans that witnesses will be two men, or a man and two women; justifying matching two women with a man with possible forgetfulness from either of the two women when the other will be able to remind her), right to polygamy (4:3), management and maintenance of affairs (4:34) where men will be in charge, handling disloyalty (4:34, and 128), and exercising the right to separation (2:226-230, 65:1-2, 4:19).

One notes here that many of these points of inequality are questioned by liberal as well as some non-Muslims who make serious attempts to have a global picture on all points of equality and inequality. Yet the natural psycho-cognitive traits that are the main frame for such disparities cannot be overlooked or downplayed.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR, DRIVE AND ACTIVITY

It is the right of a woman to preserve her beauty and to appear in reasonably beautiful clothes: "Allah is graceful and He likes beauty" (Muslim, *hadith* no. 131) and made beautiful things and creatures attractive to human beings. "Fascinating in the eyes of people is the love of things they covet: women and sons..." (3:14). While sexual attitude, feeling, attractiveness and excitement are all natural to human beings, Islam promotes modest, humane, rational, purposeful, disciplined and contained sexual behaviour in both man and woman. In order to attain this conduct, Islam commands Muslims (men and women) to lower their gaze, together with his command to guard their sexual parts (24:30-31), for the

eye is the key to the feelings, and the look is a messenger of desire, that may lead to unlawful sexual relationship.

Considering the grievousness of consequences of extramarital and premarital sexual relationships, Islam lays severe equal punishments for adultery and fornication for both sexes (24:2), and specifies punishment for false accusation for adultery (24:4, 23). Precautionary punishment (*ta'zir*) can also be employed to prevent people from landing in situations that can lead to unlawful sexual behaviour and activities.

Islam institutionalises the sexual drive in man and woman through marriage, in order to protect them from any immorality. Any man that is capable of maintenance of a family is encouraged to marry (al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 4677), most especially young men whose sexual urge is forceful, and in case the situation does not permit, fasting is encouraged to curb sexual drive and preserve chastity. On the other hand, parents are prohibited from blocking the ways of their daughters when they are interested in marriage. "But force not your girls to prostitution when they desire chastity, in order that you may make a gain in the goods of this life." (24:33) Nothing will provide sexual security, or meet sexual need than having sexual contact in a legal marriage, and such a voluntary fasting is applicable to both men and women, but is more relevant to men due to their high degree of sexual drive.

The husband provides sexual security to his wife, and the wife guards her chastity in order to provide sexual security to her husband, and both of them complement each other to attain sexual satisfaction according to their needs. Both of them are to ensure the sexual satisfaction of the other party. The *hadith* forbids a woman from refusing to meet the husband sexual needs, while the husband is ordered to seek his wife's consent before coitus interruption (*'azl*).

In Islam, sexual activity should be performed on the basis of etiquettes, and is considered an act of *'Ibadah*, if it is within a legal marriage in accordance with proper Islamic guidelines that are disciplined and contained. As such, there is no place for beastly satisfaction of the sexual urge. The *hadith* refers to rewards in having lawful sexual activity with one's wife: "...and in sexual activity that you perform legally, there is a *sadaqah*." (Muslim, *hadith* no. 1674)

The husband and wife are free to have sexual activity whenever they desire, and in situations they prefer, according to norms, provided that it is not during menstrual periods (2:222), and not in the afternoon on the fasting month, nor should men have sexual intercourse while he is observing *i'tikaf* in the mosque (2:187). On the other hand, they are advised to guard their modesty, and to consider that as one of the qualities of believers who are to succeed and be admitted into paradise (23:5), (33:35).

DRESSING

Islam decides the parts of the body that has to be covered by both genders, in what is considered the limits of *'awrah*, and has to be covered during prayer and while mixing with people who are not forbidden in marriage. Other parts may need to be covered for further modesty and in conformity with local culture. There are also exceptions to remove parts of the veil for sitting women who are not going to marry again. "Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage, there is no blame on them if they lay aside their (outer) garments, provided they make not a wanton display of their beauty: but it is best for them to be modest: and Allah is One Who sees and knows all things." (24:60).

One of the purposes of dressing is to cover the shame of both male and female. Al-Quran (7:26) says: "O ye Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you, but raiment of righteousness that is the best." The wisdom of *hijab* (Islamic veil for women) despite different applications is to preserve modesty and protect women from the harassment of men and vice versa. It will also save men from being sexually aroused by women, which might lead to sexual harassment.

Islam decides codes of dress for both men and women, despite the fact that much attention is placed by Muslims on only the dress codes for Muslim women. Some of these codes apply equally to men, and cultural norms that are not in contradiction with Islam may be observed in choosing gender dressing. Greater attention is given to the dress of a woman in Islamic literature, due to sensitivity of woman's sexual attraction, and to cultural perception. Recent attention of Muslim organizations to dress codes is not unconnected with western influence in exploiting female sexuality for commercial purposes.

The following features need to be observed in women dressing (al-Qaradawi 1995):

1. The dress must cover the entire body except the face and hands, and the headscarf must cover the chest of the woman (24:31),
2. It must not be transparent, revealing what is underneath it,
3. It must be loose and not tight-fitting so that the parts of her body are defined,
4. Muslim women are to cover themselves with a loose over-garment whenever they go out (33:59),
5. She must not wear clothes which are specifically for men,
6. She must not intend to draw men's attention to her concealed adornment by the use of perfume or other means.

The following verses (24:30-31) are very essential in providing a clear understanding of the position of Islam on gender dressing and interaction:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.

CONCLUSION

The paper is a modest contribution to present a clear position that Islam holds on gender and sexuality. It adopts the Islamic *Wasatiyyah* perspective, which advocates a moderate position while upholding basic principles, and promoting issues relevant to Muslim in contemporary situations. The author draws attention to the need to distinguish local and regional cultural norms and practices from the principles of *Shari'ah*.

Selected issues on gender and sexuality are discussed through which some verses of al-Quran are highlighted, most especially those that made references to gender functions, interaction, dressing, marriage relationship, separation and equality. Although the discussion is generally brief, it is hoped that some important points that deserve the attention of both classical and liberal trends have been highlighted. Finally, it is essential that Muslims preserve Islamic identity without imposing personal or regional preferences on others, and it is essential that they practise their religion in its totality, without any attempt to mix it with traditional or foreign alien cultures.

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