

BOOK/MONOGRAPH FEATURE

Men's Involvement in Reproductive Health: An Islamic Perspective

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Throughout the world, sexual and reproductive health (S&RH) programs have devoted preponderant attention to women. However, in recent years, the need to also focus on men has been articulated, and some modest, low-level programs have in fact been pursued. There are two justifications for this gradual programmatic shift. One, men also have their own S&RH problems. Two, men—owing to their privileged positions and dominant roles in families, communities and organizations—are influencing women's health in markedly negative ways. Given this two-pronged impetus, male participation or involvement in S&RH programs is therefore critical and pivotal. However, between the two, the latter carries more weight and serves as the guiding principle for pushing men's program participation.

The predominantly Islamic Indonesia, one of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region that is a committed signatory to relevant international and global platforms of action, has adopted the male involvement strategy. The monograph's introduction briefly describes this official adoption, stating that in the Department of Health's Operational Guidelines for Integrated Reproductive Health Services in Indonesia, the role

of men has been cited as one of the basic principles (p.1). However, the material, in the subsequent part of its introduction, points to the paucity of knowledge on how such a principle, probably the first to be enshrined in the country's official document, can be operationalized and actualized in programs. It further notes, in this initial chapter, that the country's scarce knowledge on men's role is not at all surprising. It emphasizes that as a whole, S&RH—from the standpoints of knowledge and practice—is largely an unfamiliar phenomenon in Indonesia: "...the main problem with reproductive health is not just the limited attention given to men's reproductive health, but to reproductive health itself" (p.2).

The monograph was published as an initial contribution of the Center for Women's Studies of the State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, Indonesia to addressing the country's dearth of empirical knowledge on male involvement in S&RH. Said material contains the evidence gathered from the Center's research initiated in 2004 entitled "Developing a culturally appropriate male involvement training curriculum in reproductive health". The study utilized survey questionnaire interviews (n=50), key informants

interviews (n=19), focus group discussions (n=7) and a document review of the Qur'an. The review of the Qur'an constituted an essential part of the investigation, because the ways of life of Islamic men and women are well guided by it. Aligned with the overall justification for men's involvement, the research was undertaken towards forming ways to support the attainment of women's health. Both the research and the monograph were supported by Ford Foundation/Indonesia (an international organization with interest in innovative and pace-setting efforts), and crafted by three UIN scholars—Hamim Ilyas, Sekar Ayu Ariyani and Rachmad Hidayat.

The publication has seven parts, all of which embody the findings derived from the study. The first presents a general background on men's involvement in S&RH in Indonesia (some items were cited earlier), as well as a description of the above-mentioned research (in terms of objectives and methods). The second dwells on the results of the review of the Qur'an, particularly highlighting heterosexual relations (principles of male and female relations, marriage, rights and duties of husband and wife with respect to health, welfare insurance, the right to enjoy sexual intercourse, having children, care of children, family leadership, ideal wife, polygamy and domestic violence). The third section offers a conceptual perspective, specifically discussing the scope, reasons and forms of men's involvement in S&RH. In the fourth part, the monograph provides further details about the topic, except that at this stage, it cleverly posits its discussion according to the three stages of women's reproductive life (pre-reproductive, reproductive, and post-reproductive).

From its broad topics in the previous four sections, the monograph now zeroes-in on a very specific subject in the fifth part—family planning and domestic violence. These two matters are at the heart of sexual and reproductive health—if programs tackle the pressing problems in these areas, women's health is largely assured. In its fifth section, therefore, the material appropriately details men's involvement (for and/or against) in regard to fertility control, contraceptive use, abortion, and

domestic violence. Cognizant that the dynamics, complexities and outcomes of men's involvement also have social aspects, the monograph—in its sixth part—discusses individual and collective perspectives and experiences on communication and reproductive health education. The publication's seventh and final section presents conclusions and recommendations.

This monograph on male involvement is significant because it is a fine addition to the burgeoning body of published knowledge on the subject. However, it is doubly significant because it is derived from the perspectives and experiences of individuals and groups of Islamic faith. I have researched on the problematique for more than a decade now, and I could say that there hardly exists—to my knowledge—a set of Islamic perspectives as comprehensive as that covered in the monograph. In this era where cultural tolerance or acceptance is deemed more critical than cultural imperialism and imposition, the material is more than a fine addition to both discourse and action.

The material's impact may not be immediate insofar as S&RH programs are concerned. It usually takes a while before knowledge gets translated into action—there are immense social structures through which information has to be conveyed, considered, and most importantly, accepted and funded. However, the important thing is that such knowledge has already been collected and organized; the movement towards program utilization could be planned as an intermediate goal (which the research has promised to fulfill through the development of a training curriculum). For the time being, the monograph is very much useful, most immediately to academics and researchers. I—a Catholic and virtually with Western education—have no prior clue as to what Islam, through the Qur'an, has to say about S&RH—this being the reason why, upon receipt of the material, I readily relished it. I would say that its major attraction is the chapter in which Islam is somewhat demystified, in my view, as it unfolded specific statements on a range of S&RH issues. Let me quote some of these statements:

1. “The main Qur’anic concept regarding male and female relations is that one is *zauj*—that means the partner of the other. This concept implies that both sexes have to cooperate with each other in all matters of life, including reproductive health. The cooperation has to be performed equally to create a “good life” (*hayah thayyibah*) for all.” (p.9)

2. “The Qur’an states four principles of an ethical relationship between men and women. These principles are the basis of any order and mode of relations concerning men and women in social life. The principles are equality, brotherhood, freedom and justice.” (p.10)

3. On equality, the monograph states that “As human beings, men and women are equal before Allah. Allah gives them equal honorable status as the descendants of Adam (S.al-Isra’, 17:70).” (p.10)

“However, it is indisputable that a certain verse in the Qur’an literally states that males are better than females in terms of their status (S. al-Baqarah, 2:228). A similar statement can also be found in a hadis or Prophet’s saying which literally states that females are weaker than males in their *‘aql* (reason) (a *hadis* transmitted by al-Bukhari and Muslim).” (p.10)

4. “Islam recognizes that the female function of reproduction is a serious burden. The Qur’an describes pregnancy as *wahnan ‘ala wahnin* (a pain above pain/an extremely weak condition) (S. Luqman, 31:14) and the process of giving birth as *kurhan* or exhaustingly difficult (S. al-Ahqaf, 46: 15).” (p.17)

5. “A verse in the Qur’an says that a woman is like a “*harts*” or farmland in which a man can go any time he wants (S.al-Baqarah, 2:

223). A hadis transmitted by al-Bukhari and Muslim from Abu Hurairah shows that the Prophet said, “If a husband calls his wife to bed and the wife rejects the call, she will be cursed by angels until dawn.” (p.18)

“The literal meaning of this verse and hadis is that fulfilling the husband’s sexual desire is the wife’s obligation, regardless of the situation. However, the Qur’an states that such obligation should be employed righteously (*bil-ma’ruf*) which requires those previously mentioned criteria.” (p.18)

The aforementioned are only a few of the many statements offered in the 15-page second chapter. It is best that the cited few should be understood in the context of the many others; omission commonly leads to narrow and erroneous interpretations, which the authors have also implied in the monograph (p.18). Particularly in the purview of the integration of Qur’an-based standards in S&RH programs, where men’s involvement will constitute a strategy through which to effect women’s health, accurate interpretations are critical. The most formidable challenge transcends beyond the issue on interpretation and elaboration. The challenge points to how these religious statements will be employed to bring about desired changes, considering that such verses are replete with apparent complexities (for instance, when is the woman’s sexual obligation to her husband deemed righteous, and who sets the standard of righteousness?) and contradictions (for example, men and women are said to be equal in some instances, but not in others). For the study that has promised to produce a culturally-appropriate training curriculum—with ramifications for S&RH programs—the challenge is indeed real.