

Khalidah's Story: An African American Muslim Women's Journey to Freedom

by Dr. Debra Majeed

Khalidah¹ never envisioned herself as a victim and a Muslim. She was employed and educated, an American of African ancestry, a woman with a healthy level of self-esteem. And, although she married one of the first Muslim men she met before her transition to Islam, she felt confident that she had avoided the mistake she made in her first marriage 20 years earlier—choosing a man with abusive tendencies.

So when Khalidah shared with her husband her excitement about her budding friendship with a colleague who happened to be a lesbian, she read his disapproving tone and disposition as mild irritation, rather than a prelude to an assault. She had taken her *Shahadah* (declaration of faith), less than six months before, and was learning her religion at the same time she was getting to know her husband, and discovering her rights and responsibilities as a Muslim wife. Apparently, her husband was more than irritated with their conversation; the physical abuse that followed compelled Khalidah to call the local police, leave her home, and later divorce him.

Indeed, African American Muslim families face many of the same challenges that confront other Muslims and non-Muslim households. Diverse interpretations coupled with cultural or traditional norms about spousal rights continue to result in conflicts and tensions in numerous households and mosques across the U.S. Moreover, stereotypes of Islam and Muslims relating to the oppression of women have added to the odd mix of sources that hinder both non-Muslim and Muslim understanding about what behavior is healthy, just, and permissible between a husband and a wife.

To be clear, wife beating was a common practice in seventh century Arabia when the Qur'an was revealed, as it still is in many contemporary societies. Some of the followers of the Prophet—then and today—carry the acceptance or tangible practice of wife beating with them when they accept Islam. Nevertheless, a critical examination of 4:34, the single verse generally cited on this matter, and the *Sunnah* (the record of the sayings and actions of the Prophet and the second source of Islamic law and practice) indicates that marital violence is un-Islamic. That is, Islam does not condone domestic abuse or wife beating. Still, as Talad Eid has observed, “abusive men completely disregard the Islamic teachings of kindness, mercy, gentleness, and forgiveness, just as they disregard the prophetic tradition of Prophet Muhammad who never hit a woman.”

Equally clear is that marriage is a social contract, a “source of blessings,” or *barakah*, through which a man and a woman vow before their witnesses to live together in harmony according to Divine law. In fact, Muslims who fear that they will be unjust to their prospective spouses are

discouraged from contracting a marriage. The social and religious nature of marriage in Islam further suggests that the absence and/or breakdown of three important measures unnecessarily contributed to the abuse Khalidah endured.

First, marriage in Islam is communal. That is, members of the local community are responsible to and for one another. That Khalidah's husband abused his former wife was well known in their local mosque, yet this information was not shared with Khalidah. Those who cared deeply for her and her husband said they assumed he had "moved beyond that" and was now able to "control his anger." Regardless of these assumptions, the demonstration of true "care" for Khalidah should have included notification of her husband's past behavior prior to their marriage.

Second, as many new to their faith do, Khalidah relied too heavily upon her spouse to guide her along her Islamic journey. As he helped her with Arabic, the recitation of prayers, and the gender dynamics of their mosque, she often could not differentiate between expressions of "his Islam" and the actual prescriptions of her faith. Rather than turn to Allah with her doubts, she tossed them aside. Initially, she says, "I was just too naïve." Rather than thoroughly investigate her husband's past and his interactions outside of the mosque, she read his "public reputation" and his personal interest in and protection of her as the qualities of a "good Muslim husband." More troubling was her confession that throughout the year they spent "talking to" each other—the Muslim way of getting to know a person for the prospect of marriage—Khalidah dismissed her husband-to-be's verbal abuse as something that would be erased as she became more familiar with her faith and the divinely expected role of a Muslim woman.

Third, when Khalidah did seek help from local Muslim leaders, they informed her that intervention required her husband's permission. Although he refused their mediation, they continued to permit him to instruct other Muslims in issues of marriage and daily life.

Today, Khalidah is in the sixth year of a healthy and abuse-free Islamic marriage. Before audiences across the country, she promotes the development of resources that support healthy Muslim community life. She has joined others in sustained efforts to support and empower Muslim women and men as they seek marriage—what the Prophet is believed to equate with "practicing half of your religion."

Granted, I have only begun to consider domestic abuse, African American appropriations of Islam, the Qur'anic view of gender relations, and the extent to which Muslims in America view marital violence as a private affair. I can report, however, that I know Khalidah and her story VERY well.

¹ A psynonymon for an American who became Muslim in 1998.