



Musawah Global Life Stories Project

IRAN COUNTRY REPORT

**Documenting Women's Life Stories
Relating to *Qiwamah* and *Wilayah***

2014

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**This report, which was submitted to the Musawah Secretariat by the country team,
has been lightly edited by the Secretariat for format and style**

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Introduction

This life stories project examines selected Iranian women's experiences and understandings of two concepts which play a central role in shaping power relations within Muslim families; namely *qiwamah* and *wilayah*. These are two juristic notions in *fiqh*. *Qiwamah* is the building block, the DNA, of patriarchy within the Muslim legal tradition, though it is not actually a Qur'anic concept (Mir-Hosseini, 2012). It derives from the word '*qawwamun*' in verse 4:34. *Qiwamah* refers to the male authority within the family setting. It may be defined as husband's control over his wife. The ways in which *qiwamah* affect the relationship between men and women in the family, is at the heart of the life stories project. *Wilayah* refers to male authority over daughter which may be applicable through marriage decision making, or other forms of men's authority in the Muslim family context.

The aims of this project include developing the consciousness of participants about the cited notions, knowledge production toward legal reform, social change, and also networking and making alliances around the globe. The life story project's knowledge building may be done through narrating lived realities of women.

The project in Iran had special circumstances since women NGOs are banned from working. Almost all of the work of the project is done by one volunteer, rather than team work. The legal mapping process was done through some meetings with some legislatively informed women. This group of people would be referred to as team members in this document. Recruitment of the resource persons was done through my acquaintances and mutual friends, since social networks were not fully working at the time of research implementation.

This piece of work includes goals of the project, planning of the process, and implementation strategy. It introduces team members and their contribution. The process of legal mapping and its body would be explained. The process of documentation of the life stories is depicted in the following chapters. Criteria for choosing the resource persons have been mentioned. Data collection process and methodology of the work and its ethics are being discussed afterwards. Socioeconomic backgrounds of women in Iran are explained to picture their status. Finally life stories are being narrated. Individual analysis and overall analysis are the last chapters in this report.

Goals of the project

Two key aims of the Life Story Project in Iran were knowledge production, and capacity building regarding the Musawah materials and local sources. Knowledge building has been done through documentation of the real life stories. Through the interview process and follow ups, we were talking about women's challenges and their efforts to overcome their difficulties. Friendly talks were managed about what women had done and what they might do to successfully build their lives out of the relics of the problematic pasts. Reflection on their potentials and limitation helped women to narrate their stories under the light of conscious belief that they could manage their lives in the best possible way. Concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* were theoretical tools which helped women reflect in an organised way, on their situations.

Three people were selected as resource persons. One of the interviewees was introduced through skype Emotional Literacy sessions¹ that I conduct, another person was recruited through women's

¹ Emotional literacy sessions were about knowing what feelings we have, managing emotions and communicating them with other people. Throughout Skype sessions, we talked about our feelings and the problematic relationships we had with people around us.

groups² which I run, and the third person was a girl who was participating in Narges institute's³ educational programs, she was introduced by Ms. Nasr who is an active member in the cited institute. The legal map is drawn by discussion in the team who were active in family courts, or women's issues. Advocacy and movement building was another target of the project. Due to NGO's limitations in Iran and also my restrictions as a student in UK who has been travelling between Iran and UK, the latter goals could not be fulfilled. Networking and capacity building were not possible as the political situation of Iran did not allow working on gender inequality and its related religious debates.

Planning Process

Phases of work

Considering the socio-political limitations we face in Iran's case and also my personal issues (agent in charge of connecting local resources to the research project), there were restrictions on implementing the Indonesian model of the research. However, the defined targets were met through personal acquaintance with active women who were engaged legally, or were ready to share their personal stories for Musawah.

The first phase was to form a team (see below) who could work together on the project and exchange knowledge between team members. This included discussing Musawah's materials and power points, besides exploring local sources which may be of use in this regard. Legal mapping was done through this phase.

The second phase was my individual work in collecting life stories. This job was done by linking the group explorations on legal issues, and juristic narrations of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* to the real life experiences of resource persons. This phase includes framing some questions to direct the flow of life story telling. Besides, analysis of the narrations should be considered respectively.

After discussing Musawah's goals and the Life Stories Project with some acquaintances who had professional experiences on women's issues or family courts, five women joined the team. Due to the enthusiasm of team members and the capacities which may be mobilized in this regard, it may be said that the knowledge building process was worth being tested in the Iranian group. This made the first phase of the work as an experiment in capacity building of the team members. The group participated in legal mapping and tracing *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in the legislative body.

Unfortunately in the second phase of the work, keeping the group together and working within that setting was impossible. Each member of the group had her own excuse not to engage as the work demanded commitment to the project goals. Team members were not related to any network or women's organisations, and they could not engage in interviewing resource persons. Thus second phase of the project is implemented individually by me, regarding the above limitations. Team members had no commitment in the process of gathering life stories and engaging the resource persons through interviews.

² Women's groups were organised to talk about problematic issues in our marriages, child raising and the emotional aspects of our relationships with our husbands. In these sessions kids were involved in play groups and mothers had sessions to talk about their relationships.

³ This organisation provides educational sessions for girls with economic disadvantages, classes such as computer, life skills, communication skills, etc. are being run to empower girls who do not have economic supports. This organisation also deals with problems of girls who have attempted to run away from their homes.

Team composition

A team comprised of multiple educational and legal experts had discussions about *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in the classical and new *fiqh* literature. In addition, the group debated legislative challenges for women within the family. Sessions were conducted in order to discuss civic and family law with special focus on *qiwamah* and *wilayah*. Legal mapping was an outcome which has been produced out of these sessions.

One team member was interested in the legal mapping partly due to her professional experiences in family courts. We had three sessions talking about the legal restrictions and potentialities as well as women's challenges in family courts with the legislative body. These sessions have led to the legal mapping output. The legal mapping output was sent to other team members, and in the next session it was discussed with the whole group.

Two sessions with a different team member focused on talking about the Musawah goals and visions other than the Life Stories Project. In these meetings, the team also discussed local work in Iran during the reform era. One of the outcomes of the session was discussing the proposal of a bill regarding reforms to legislative bodies related to CEDAW (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>), which had been prepared by the Centre for Women's participation in 2005.

Another team member helped us rethink some legal issues regarding the limitations and spaces for women in practicing their rights. In a separate session with her, information was exchanged on the ways in which current legal process and family law revisions are marginalising women. She mentioned the unfinished CEDAW project which is now being suspended after some efforts during the reform era of Khatami.

Another team member had a Skype session with the writer and Dr. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, which introduced her to the project. She helped recruit a resource person from Narges institute, an educational institute which provides girls with classes such as computer, life skills, art and craft.

Another team member sent information regarding legal mapping on human and women's rights.

Implementation

First phase: Legal mapping

Process

After explaining Musawah's goals and the Life Story Project to the team members, we started from legislative context in order to explore more about *qiwamah* and *wilayah*. During 3 sessions the laws were being discussed in order to extract those parts which are linked to women's lives and their experiences of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* within the family. Then two more sessions were devoted to develop the sample questions on the Legal mapping. The final version was amended according to the expert's comments. Following those sessions, team members explored *qiwamah* and *wilayah* referring to materials, Power Point of Musawah was translated to Persian so that further discussions can be directed. After having Dr. Al-Sharmani's feedback, the final legal map was prepared.

Data

According to family codes men have control over women's autonomy. A husband can divorce his wife whenever he wants (1133 civil law). Wife can request divorce when in *Osr-o Haraj* (difficulty) (1130 civil law). Husband may delegate divorce right to wife (in marriage contract). But in practice women's right to divorce is not applied. Restricted divorce options exist for women (e.g. for *Khul'* wife should pay her husband); wife may lose right to maintenance/custody of child if she divorces through *Khul'* in

law. It is also true in practice, that husband's permission is required for wife's travel outside of country; wife should live in the place that her husband defines (law and practice); a *wali* is required for marriage; men have right for polygamy through permanent and also temporary marriage; a husband can prevent wife from a job which is against family's good, or his or his wife's honour (law and practice)

Men's right over women's freedom to their bodies is another legislative restriction on them, in the law and also in social practice. Husband's permission is required for contraception and marital rape is not recognised; and abortion is illegal. Minimum age of marriage is 13 for girls and 15 for boys, marriage is not prohibited before that age (dependant on *wali*'s authorisation). Resistance to *tamkin* (sexual obedience) may lead to divorce and deprivation of *nafaqah*; withdrawal from sexual duties without legitimate excuse lead to deprivation of *nafaqah* (1108 Civil Law); if a father kills his child he is not subjected to *qisas* in law and also in practice. Woman's compensation for death is half that of man's (Penal Law). Specific dress code for women has been sanctioned and they have to wear *hijab* in the public spaces. Women's compensation for death is half that of men's.

Men's right over guardianship of children is the other issue of consideration. Husband's permission is required for children's education, travel, health care (according to social norms, not legal policies), and permission for marriage (of unmarried girl) due to the law (practice too). For guardianship of the child whose parents are living apart, mom has priority until 7 years of age. In practice mother may retain custody, if mother remarries while she has custody the law transfers custody to the father. If a crime happens against a child, father or paternal grandfather are in charge of claiming the legal process. The father and grandfather are '*wali ghahri*' (1180 civil law).

Second phase: Documentation of life stories

Overview

After the legal mapping process, which took two months, documentation of the life stories started. The guiding framework for the life stories was developed through informal talks with acquainted women/friends who have been experiencing and referring to *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in their own ways. Because social networks and nongovernmental organisations are not effectively involved and are politically marginalised, the possibility of having public brainstorming sessions and public meetings was nearly zero. Therefore, I arranged individual sessions with women.

After choosing the resource persons who may contribute throughout the project, the process of documenting life stories began. The back-and-forth journey to investigate *qiwamah* and *wilayah* as it is depicted in life stories is a matter of concern, thus the process of making a frame for life stories would be a dynamic one.

Choosing resource persons

A list of people who could be contacted as resource persons (see below) was developed through informal chats with friends or acquaintances. Three women were selected from the list. As the process of making bonds with selected people and following the steps could encounter challenges, a group of seven women were specified so that three stories could be selected from the bigger group.

The criteria for choosing resource persons in this project were trust, openness, enthusiasm and availability through phone calls, Skype or face-to-face meetings. According to the socio-political pressures, bonding trust with resource persons was the most important issue to be considered. Apart from the above conditions, trust is a major issue in the project as the whole process is about communication and reliability. Thus, resource persons may be women who have a previous relationship with a team member, or can develop a trusting relationship quickly.

Openness to narrate the private life was the second criterion in selecting interviewees. Due to the common tendency of many women who are withdrawn from narrating personal stories, it would be crucial to explore if the resource persons are keen to open up and talk or not. Women who were eager to talk are selected as resource persons. Thirdly it was important for participants to have enthusiasm to be involved in the Musawah project. Therefore, selected women are those who are committed to contributing and also being open to communication.

Availability and willingness to have follow ups, feedbacks and possible supports, were other points to be considered. It was important that the resource person communicates her reflections, emotions and make ways to talk in a free friendly manner. One of the main issues was keeping contacts with resource persons when they were in need to talk. As I might be in touch frequently while being away from Iran, the possibility of having phone conversations, skype chats or other ways of supports were also taken into account according to the resource persons' needs.

Here are profiles of the women who were contacted as potential resource persons:

- Wife of a martyred (Iran/Iraq war) man who has had to overcome life challenges in her husband's absence. She has 2 children, age around 50, been a math teacher, has lived in Qom (a religious province) for some years, had been involved in some political issues.
- A girl who has experienced pressure in the family and is deprived of making choices in her life.
- A community leader who has established several organizations in order to support women. She has established a sewing workshop for women who are head of the household.
- A domestic violence victim who has been struggling in court for divorce. The woman faces difficulties in getting a divorce as her husband has asked for a huge amount of money for a divorce
- A woman who has been struggling due to separation for some years, she has experienced abuses, but been strong and overcame many difficulties.
- A housewife with difficulties; her husband has been polygamous for a period.
- A person who has been living in exile, struggling in her relationship with her husband, and now thinking of divorce after two years of hardship.

Data collection process

Interviews were done through Skype sessions for two of the resource persons. The third interviewee was approached in person through meeting in Narges institute. In primary chats with three resource persons, a couple of questions helped develop the foundation to share some ideas about *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and also have some inputs from the resource persons to follow the story telling process in a smooth but focused way. The flow of the conversation was to be directed in later sessions as the goal of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* project had to be maintained.

Interviewees were:

- Elham, the woman who went through many struggles in divorce. As she was a friend, she was comfortable sharing her life story.
- Zahra, the woman in exile, who experienced abuses in her in-law's family, her husband left her, and he was going out with another woman.
- Nasibah, the girl who was attending Narges institute's sessions. She was not comfortable opening up and narrating her story; she preferred to answer questions briefly.

Two of our interviews did not result in documentation of life stories. One of the interviews did not lead to a life story which could provide us related information to *qiwamah* and *wilayah*, so the interview was not included in this report. She was daughter of a martyred man, she has moved from a housewife to a woman interested in politics and she personally has experienced divorce. Another interviewee could not remember exactly what she has been through during years of separation, and she was not comfortable sharing the details of her separation. Thus her interview is not considered here.

According to the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and its representations in everyday life of women, one starting point is the power structure in the family. Interviewees were asked to talk freely about the stages of their lives and the challenges in their relationships with their husbands or their fathers. Their stories were put as the background to observe *qiwamah* and *wilayah*.

Paying attention to the river of life of each woman was the second step to envisage how *qiwamah* and *wilayah* were affecting women's lives. There were messages and hints in the ways women narrated their stories, as well as their attempts to relate themselves to the incidents happening in their lives.

Due to different natures of the interviews each person was approached differently. Elham was much more open in narrating her story, each time she opened a new horizon to the research. Nasibah, on the other hand, was not comfortable sharing some hidden aspects of her life. It may also be said that she was not as deep as Elham involved with some aspects of her life and herself. Zahra may be put in the middle of the journey of knowing herself as well as confronting her challenges and her chances.

Methodology

The methodological approach in the Life Stories Project was letting the interviewees talk freely and express their own views on their experiences rather than pushing them through specific research constructs. Tracing *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in the legal context and socio-cultural practices and their interconnection with real life experiences of the resource persons is at the heart of this project. The interviewees are called resource persons as their experiences are seen as the main source for this research. However these experiences are our sources to explore more, and explain women's choices and their ways of knowing. As Joan Scott (1991) mentions "experience is not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain" (p.797)⁴.

Mutual respect and reciprocity were tools to approach the women. Creating space for interviewees to talk freely about their experiences rather than speaking on their behalf, has been my approach throughout the process. Such an approach had its advantages and disadvantages. Elham and Zahra talked and expressed their experiences and thoughts, but Nasibah could not picture her story as openly as the other two. Seemingly unstructured interviews may not work for those women who have chosen to be silent, or are forced not to speak their minds. Valuing experiences of women through unstructured interviews should accompany questions which help women reflect on their life stories. Analyses of the stories were done through a framework developed by Musawah Global Life Stories project team. Although we should be cautious in generalising women's behaviour and actions, *qiwamah* and *wilayah* were two guiding concepts to shed lights on some similarities, which were apparent in women's life stories. Socio-cultural aspects of women's lives overlap with the religious aspects of their realities.

Ethics

Confidentiality was the first priority in collecting and analysing of the stories. Keeping the names of the resource persons anonymous was another issue in the research. Avoiding victimization of the resource persons, while being sensitive to their vulnerabilities were a task to fulfil. The other mandate was keeping the life stories in a way that represent the resource person's point of views, rather than pushing them to fit to the researcher's concerns. Therefore a balance between interviewed women's perceptions and structure of the research has been made.

Two of the interviewees were acquainted with the writer, so they trusted easily and shared their lives through the sessions. Narges institute asked for ethics of the research and the ethical frame of the Musawah's Life Story Project; it was handed in according to the request.

⁴ Scott, Joan. "The Evidence of Experience." In: *Critical Inquiry*, 17, 4, 1991: 773-797.

Women in Iran: Socio-economic background

According to the Global Gender Gap report (2013)⁵, the total population of Iran is 74.80 million with population growth of 1.11%. Fertility rate (births per woman) is 1.92, while overall male to female sex ratio is 1.03(2013:226). According to the Global Gender Gap report (2012)⁶, Iran holds a place in upper-middle income countries which is 3,976 to 12,275 US dollars, 158.09 GDP (US\$ billions) (2013:226). Iran's rank in global gender index is 127 which is the last place in the regional ranking. It slips in the rankings to this position because of a worsening of the estimated earned income ratio (2012:27). Female to male ratio at birth is 0.95, which put Iran in rank of 41. Life expectancy of female to male is 1.03.

Single mean age at marriage for women is 24 years. Early marriage for women aged between 15 and 19 is 17%. Maternal mortality ratio (per 100000 live births) is 21. Infant mortality rate (probability of dying between birth and age 1 per 1000 live births) is 21. Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1000 girls aged 15-19) is 26. Legislation permitting abortion to preserve a woman's physical health exists. Iran doesn't have a good condition regarding parental authority in marriage, or after divorce. Legislation punishing acts of violence against women in case of domestic violence, does not exist. In terms of inheritance rights of daughters, Iran does not have a good condition. Some widows have inheritance rights. Women's access to land ownership is possible for some women. Some women have access to credit. Women's access to property, other than land is possible. Length of maternity leave is 90 days. Maternity leave benefits (percentage of wages paid in covered period) is 67% (2013:227).

Literacy rate is 81% female to 89% male which is 0.90. In the literacy rate, Iran holds the rank of 102 out of 136 countries. Enrolment in primary education is 96% females, to 98% males which is 0.98 in ratio. Female enrolment ratio in secondary education shows a wider gap which is 80% females, to 92% males (0.87) according to the Global Gender Gap report of 2012. Females' enrolment in tertiary education is 49% which is the same as the males with 48%. The state intervention on behalf of men in education arena has filled the gap which existed 8 years ago on behalf of women. Female enrolment in the universities had gone up 8 years ago due to female's appeal in higher education. In 2006 Iran ranked 80 out of 115 countries while it slipped in 2011 to 105 (out of 135 countries) in educational attainment.

Female labour force participation in Iran is 17%, compared to the male labour participation which is 75%. This keeps the country in the rank of 134 out of 136 countries in the Global Gender Gap report of 2013. While male estimated earned income is 18,785, female's income is 3,895 which shows female to male ratio of 0.21. Female adult unemployment rate (percentage of female labour force) is 17%, comparing to the male adult unemployment rate which is 9%. Share of women employed in the non-agricultural sector (percentage of total non-agricultural employment) is 15%. According to the ILO report (1996), 87.1% males in urban areas and 91.8% in rural areas are economically active, while this amount for females is 14.8% and 19% respectively. Employed male percentage in urban areas is 83.0% and 88.3% in rural areas, while this amount for females is 14.2% and 18.5 % respectively. Economically inactive percentage for urban males is 12.6 %, while for females it is 84.9%; for rural areas this amount is 7.9%, for men and 80.8% for women.⁷ Female teachers in primary education hold 57%, while this amount for females involved in tertiary education is 19%. Women who have an account in a formal financial institution are 62%, comparing to men who hold 85%.

⁵ The Global Gender Gap report 2013 by World Economic Forum.

⁶ The Global Gender Gap report 2012 by World Economic Forum.

Appendix- Legal mapping of state obligations under international, regional and domestic laws: opportunities for advocacy (2013).

⁷ <http://amar.sci.org.ir/Detail.aspx?Ln=E&no=91177&S=TP>

Female ratio of legislators, senior officials and managers is 0.15, which is 13% female, compared to 87% male. Another gender gap is evident in professional and technical workers' number which is 34% female to 66% male, that is 0.52 female to male. One of the huge gender gaps is in the parliament members' ratio which is 3% female to 97% male. Female to male ratio in ministerial positions is 0.10, 9% females, to 91% males (2013:226).

Life Stories

Life Story #1: Elham – From a silent wife to a single mom breadwinner

Background

I am Elham, a 34 year old woman. Mother of a girl, she is 9 years old. I am a divorced woman, a single mom. I'm living in a flat in the apartment which belongs to my family. Now I have been working as a travel agent since June 2009. I have been through a hard time since 2007, but I have survived. My marriage problem and divorce had been a source of empowerment for me. I have started knowing myself and the world better in the light of problematic relationship with my ex-husband.

Married woman

I can't remember anything special from my childhood that shows major segregation, mainly because I did not have brothers. We as girls sometimes thought that our grandmother favoured boys in the family more. I was 19 years old when my first engagement was broken. The boy wanted to call off our engagement because he was in love with another girl. In our family many people said it is natural for boys to have such an attitude, why did you break the engagement for this reason? People kept saying it is natural for boys to be involved in more than one relationship. At that time I experienced patriarchy. I thought how come a girl is supposed to stay celibate till marriage, but not a boy. Such an inequality was unacceptable for me. At that time I remembered the verse of Quran 24:26, it was a pacifier for me to believe God would compensate for my loss.

الْخَبِيثَاتُ لِلْخَبِيثِينَ وَالْخَبِيثُونَ لِلْخَبِيثَاتِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتُ لِلطَّيِّبِينَ وَالطَّيِّبُونَ لِلطَّيِّبَاتِ أُولَئِكَ مُبَرَّءُونَ مِمَّا يَقُولُونَ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ

Now after some experiences, I have recognised that almost all men are like that, they have relationships freely. Seven months after breaking up the engagement, I had a suitor whom I got married to. My second relationship, which was the marriage, lasted for 11 years and then ended in divorce. My husband whom I thought was the right person for me cheated on me too. I believed God would compensate and send me a *taieb*, someone who is pure, had no relationships before marriage.

Amir was a suitor from a rich family and a good social background, his family was religious and held regular ceremonies and Quran recitation in their house. My mom told me marrying this boy will both enable me to succeed in this world, and also the hereafter. I was keeping recitation of specific *zikr* (40 days this one, 60 days another one) prior to my marriage. One of them was reading 60 days of *hadith-e-Kisa*, the day I finished prayers our *nikah* happened. However, my dad told my mom to tell me not to do such a thing; if it does not work I may become disappointed. But I believed in it. After my divorce I asked myself why God did this to me with all the surrender I had.

After the proposal was made the groom's family were rushing for engagement. I kept suggesting let's meet each other more, and then go for engagement. My dad did not agree with me and he had the last word so we had our *nikah* at that time. The groom's family had done *Istikhareh* and accordingly they said we have to rush otherwise we would lose the girl.

In the beginning of our marriage I was thankful to God because of my marriage to Amir. We wanted to go to UAE. I asked him what to wear, at that time it was in for girls to wear tight *mantues* in the streets, Amir wanted me to wear those fashionable dresses but I thought I should be thankful and grateful to God for having Amir, and not to wear those fashionable dresses. At that time I thought Fatimah - RADIA ALLAJU ANHA - has given me blessings to have Amir as my husband.

After the divorce my beliefs were shattered. I started doubting the perceptions I had about myself and others. Now I have learned that all the experiences are for us to improve. If I had not had such

experiences, I would never have had the chance to reflect on my perceptions and know myself better. When my husband cheated on me, I started blaming myself as if I had not done enough, or I had not been a good woman. After a while I recognised it was not like that, and it did not have something to do with me. I stopped blaming myself for the problems I confronted.

How did our relationship start to fracture?

I remember him and his family were so selfish. I was unhappy but tolerant and silent. The family did not give us choice to spend time separately, and wanted us to be around them. Our problem became serious when my husband started having relationships with other women. First I found out through the calls received from one of the employees of their company. I became depressed, I was breast feeding our 5 month-old daughter and cried all the time. I felt unwanted, things were imposed on me, I was not confident and could not think of the divorce.

That spring holiday, after I found out my husband was having relationships with other women, I told him I didn't want to go with his family to Mecca. I thought I deserve to be with my own family this holiday. My husband came with me and my family to the North of Iran that holiday. But every night he went out at 11 pm, to take revenge, and came back around 5 am. I acted like I didn't know anything. My grandmother respectfully asked me where my husband goes. I said I didn't know. My grandfather said he would lock the door so he couldn't go. That night he came and asked my grandfather to give him the key to go out. I was thinking what I should do. I asked myself if I should leave my 6 month baby at night and go after my husband to see what he was doing. After the holiday my dad went to talk to his parents. I told my dad please not to talk about divorce, I don't want to go for separation. Those talks were supposed to stay confidential, but my husband's parents informed him of the conversation.

Afterwards one day, my husband gave his cell phone to me and said this girl is not letting me go and she kept calling, told me to tell her to leave him alone. I shouted badly, shouted and shouted. I remember at that time, his sister had a boyfriend too while she was married. My husband recorded my voice and gave it to his mother. Our life was going on in silence and emotional separation. I remember when my daughter was fourteen months old, I was going to counselling, she said don't waste your time with this man and go for a divorce. Your husband has several girl friends, he does not go to work, he is not responsible. When Amir found out that the counsellor had told me about his relationships and advised me for separation, he got angry. He found the address of the person and went to her home threatening her.

After the counsellor's advice one day, I told my husband that I didn't love him anymore and asked him to leave me alone, I knew what was going on. My husband said I could check on him and find out if he was still seeing someone. But after that discussion, one day he called my mom saying come along and take Homa (my daughter) and Elham with you, otherwise I would kill them. My mom asked him why he was acting so childish. We left for my father's home afterwards. My husband was paying visits at nights to see my daughter, once he wanted to take her to visit his mom. I said I don't want you to take my daughter, I was breast feeding her. He took her from me and wanted to go out. I locked the door. This became an issue and everything else was forgotten. I was in my parent's home for forty days. Then we moved back in our house together, but we were emotionally and sexually apart.

For a year and some months we were living like that. I knew he was still having relationships, but acted as if I knew nothing. But one day when I went to take something out of his suitcase I noticed a number of cell phone bills. My mom said call the numbers and check to whom they belong. I called one of the numbers, a girl picked up but said she is not allowed to tell me things. Afterwards I called Amir's mom and said let me and my daughter go and live somewhere peaceful, Amir may go and do whatever hell he wants to do. My husband collected all my jewellerys and took them somewhere else. I told my dad about that. That night he came, got my daughter with him and took the car key, left me alone at home. He came back after some hours. We started sleeping apart, I was fearful, he did not give me *nafaqah*.

I remember being scared when he was walking in the house. I can't say all the things happen at that time (I have no nerves to recall them). He threatened me that he would bring other women home. He did whatever made me suffer, including talking with other women on the phone, not letting me go out. For five months we were living like that. At that time I wanted to leave my husband's home for my dad's but my dad kept telling me wait until your sister is done with her university entrance exam. I am so angry why I did not leave sooner.

Leaving my husband

I finally left my husband in July 2007. My daughter was almost three years old. I remember how much I felt liberated when I arrived at my parents' home. The night I arrived in my parents' home I wanted to go and buy anti-depressants; my brother-in-law gave me his car key and said go and buy them yourself. I didn't have to argue for going out of the house, I was enjoying my liberty for one month and did not think of anything. I was reviving myself. During that one month my husband did not even bother to call us. After one month he called and said he wanted to take our daughter to a family gathering.

Becoming financially independent in 2007

After one month of being free at my parent's house, I decided to become financially independent from my dad. I started working as a teacher. Before I earned my first salary, I sold some packs of baby diapers that were left for me, our daughter's diapers. I also sold a piece of fabric I had for *chador*. I was so happy after receiving my first salary (November 2007), I registered my daughter in a nursery with that money. After a while I started doing private tutoring. At nights I did some translation works. In the mornings I was teaching. I remember how anxious my daughter was, she would cry for some hours at nights nagging for her dad. When I called my husband to tell him that his daughter needed him he picked the phone and said Homa, honey go to sleep and then turned his phone off. Sometimes I shouted at my daughter to soothe her. When she went to sleep, I used to start crying. Because I could not sleep I took sleeping pills. I had to attend the class by 8 am. It was a tough period. December 2007 I started working as a translator.

Harsh experiences

I remember once he kicked me in the street. He had not bought bread; I said why you haven't bought bread. He brought me to my parent's home and wanted to leave me there after kicking me forcefully. When he saw I was not going to leave his car, he took me to his grandmother's home. My dad came there. After that incident we split and slept separately.

My dad hired an advocate in August 2007, told my husband this is the last time you hit my daughter. I came to my parent's home. After one month the advocate told me he was going to summon to court. This was because he had changed the door locks, to prevent me from entering the house. He had to pay me *nafaqah* and *mahr*, which he had not done yet. Consequently my husband came and said he did not want to divorce his wife but because I had hired an advocate he was going to divorce me. He threatened me this way.

Mecca Experience (April 2008)

Amir's mom called and said if I would come along with them to Mecca, I said I liked to work on my marriage, and I also like to go to Mecca but what about Amir. I asked if Amir knew about my coming on this family trip. I needed Amir's consent for renewing my passport, I did everything to go on the trip with my husband's family although I was fearful that Amir find out that I was going with his family. I told my mother-in-law that I would call Amir and ask his permission. I called him and said I was going to Mecca, he answered go to wherever hell you like, I am not going to Mecca. My daughter and I went on the family trip and Amir did not come, I sent a message to Amir on the first day of my arrival to Mecca saying we missed him in Mecca. The day after his mom called me and said Amir has arrived in Mecca. Amir stayed in his sister's hotel room while my daughter was having a fever missing her dad. It has been seven month since we were apart.

Finally Amir met us in the hall of the hotel, he hugged Homa and did not pay attention to me at all. I managed to go for breakfast whenever Amir was not around, because he kept leaving the table whenever I was there. I had money with me as I was working at that time, doing translation job. Once I went to Mother Care to buy clothing for Homa, Amir arrived at the shop and picked a lot of things for Homa. One of the family members saw him and said, wow how rich you are to buy all these clothing for your daughter. When we went to the cash machine Amir asked me if I had money to pay. I thought a bit and said yes. He wanted to test me and see how I reacted. This was the first time he paid attention to me after seven month. We went for dinner that night. I went to *haram* that night, I cried and cried. Fourteen days passed. We got back, while on the airplane I had his sister beside me instead of him. He hated being close to me. When we reached to the airport, he said go to your father's home.

Being caught in the war between two men

After the trip, I paid a visit to his uncle because he had helped me get the visa for Mecca, Amir found out that I have been in his uncle's house. He called his uncle asking me if I was there. Amir asked his uncle to let him talk to me, and then he told me what the hell I was doing in his uncle's house. When I got back to my parents' home I recognised Amir had brought all my stuff there. Quite angrily, he had put my stuff in baggage and brought them to my parents' home. There were my underwear and sleeping dresses. The day after I brought the baggage back to his mother and said I don't have a husband to use these clothing; even if I had a husband I would not wear these, I don't want them anymore. During this period I kept crying and asking God to give me my husband back. After Mecca there was silence between us. Amir's family did not contact me afterwards. A year after Mecca trip there were weddings in Amir's family. I asked them if I may come along. I went to some of them, but it was so stressful and I came to the conclusion I better not go.

The second summer after I left Amir's home I became a teacher in a good school, in the afternoons I was teaching in an institute. My life started to become stable, but Homa had left for her dad's home. Homa was attending preschool. My dad was paying for her tuition fee at that time. I was thinking when I received my *mahr* I would pay back my dad. I was depressed at that time, and being a teacher helped me feel better, I was less angry then. I was worried financially. Amir kept saying 'you have to earn your divorce', meaning I should withdraw my claim for *mahr*. He told me to go and collect my *jahaaz*- home furniture that I have bought- and all the belongings that I had in his house. When I told my dad that I want to collect my *jahaz*, my dad told me not to do that. Amir kept threatening me to collect my *jahaz*, I told him you have broken my heart and now you are threatening me with the house furniture. One day Amir brought Homa's toys to my dad's home. I went to Amir's home to take the toys back; he had changed the entrance lock. One day I could enter the house as the entrance was open. I recognised the house was empty. You can't imagine how hard it was. It was an awful feeling, like the most dreadful moment of a movie. I kept crying for one whole week. I did not have the chance to say goodbye to my home. I recognised that Amir wanted to have the divorce. It was September 2008.

I told my dad what a war it was ... I was losing my youth in this war between two of them. My dad said I was right, Amir wanted to have the divorce. My dad asked for Amir's grandfather and said if they wanted to intervene. My father told him if he may ask Amir come to the court. My father wanted to file a law suit against Amir (April 2009). I remember I suffered a lot at that time, I suffered because my father insisted on waiting rather than pursuing the divorce. If I was strong enough I would have said I wanted to have the divorce.

Court cases

The first call for court was April 2009, regarding my claim for *nafaqah*. If the husband does not pay *nafaqah* for more than six month, he may go to jail, or achieve wife's consent. If it is less than four months, he should pay fine for compensation. We made a complaint on April and the court's due was on first of September; the exact day that my daughter was supposed to go to the school for the first

time. We have collected evidences from neighbours and acquaintances that Amir has not paid *nafaqah*, has hit me and also he had had inconvenient visitors. Neighbours were witnesses that Amir had not let me in the house. On the first court, Amir behaved in a way to turn the case for himself, I cried a lot and the judge said if we do not want to live together, reach to the consent and have the divorce. The judge should not react in a flexible way as our case was penal, but as I cried so much it made the judge react sensitively. I cried and said I want to make our marriage work. The judge asked Amir if he is eager to get a flat for me, he said yes he would. We asked for *estemhaal* (more time). The next court was on December, we were supposed to reach consensus over our issues. Then on the second court day the judge asked what we wanted to do, the situation has not been changed, and Amir repeated the same things he had said previously.

The judge told us to leave so that he would precede the case. Next week the judge called and said my husband has got me a flat, tomorrow I come to the court to get the rental documents. I called Amir to thank him. He said you want to get back to the relationship, I would teach you the lesson now. I recorded Amir's voice and gave it to the judge. The judge told me if I want to get back to the relationship/marriage, to gradually take steps and make amendments. In the court I checked the lease and recognised it was sorted as the judge had told me. I was worried that Amir would make troubles for me. When we were summoned in the court for the third time, Amir said that he has some conditions for me to stay in the marriage. Firstly, he said I should not work as he would pay *nafaqah*. Secondly, our kid should not go to school; I should not meet with my parents, and other family members. I started laughing and the judge got angry and threw all the documents to the air, he said why you are acting so irrational. The judge told us to go and come back for the next court due.

In the time being, I came across someone who was working in the stock market. She checked Amir's name in the market and told me he has shares in the stock market. I called the advocate and told him to act accordingly. Now I had proof that he has money, but has not provided *nafaqah*. I knew that I would be the winner in *nafaqah* case. Amir had threatened me, but after the court he showed redemption. After the court he was swearing to God that he has no money to give me. I told him you have an expensive car, it's your fault that you spent your money on women, you have wasted my time for four years. I remember when Amir hit me in May 2007, his mom said something to belittle me. At the court I remembered that act of hers. I told Amir that I was accepting his behaviour in the past, but I am not his wife anymore and didn't have to tolerate every bad situation he was caught in. On April 2010, the divorce case was made final. In May, I brought my things to my father's home. I got my *jahaz* after one of the acquaintances negotiated with Amir's family.

Patriarchy as a tool for control in the hands of a woman

Amir and I did not belong to each other, I was a young woman who was ready for marriage commitment, while Amir used to act like a teenager who wanted to get rid of his mom by marrying me. Amir's mom used to put restrictions on him, she used to check him every now and then, she wanted to know whom he spent his time with, what music he has been listening to, etc., his mom was so controlling, she told him do not go to that place, don't do this, don't do that... Amir's mom was controlling. She kept telling Homa do not practice piano, you should not polish your nails, you should wear chador. She has double standards in treating Homa. Pantea, Amir's new wife, does many things that are not compatible with Amir's mom's beliefs. Homa was fearful of *jahanam* (hell) as Amir's mom had threatened her. Amir's mom had told Homa that if your mom puts cream on, it is a sin. I told Homa *jahanam* is within us, if we commit a sin that would hurt us from inside. Besides I told her how come her dad is not paying her what she deserves of his money and it is not a sin!

Caregiving responsibility for my daughter

I don't know when he started to have relationship with the woman whom he got married to. Due to his marriage with another woman, he gave me the *nafaqah* in a week. Then he consented for *talaq* (divorce) immediately in November 2010. Homa went to her dad in June 2010, and she got back to me

in January 2011. Homa kept on crying at nights missing her dad. Amir was frustrated of Homa's nagging for him. Homa spent some time with her dad and some time with me. Custody of Homa was with Amir, I wanted him to take responsibility for Homa. Though, Amir wanted me to have the custody. Amir could not keep Homa, and some days after the court he called me and said come and take Homa I want to live my life. Now I have gained my husband's consent for taking my daughter out of the country. I have this permission for 5 years.

After my divorce

I have been going to therapy (psychoanalysis) sessions since my divorce. I think I faced problems twice in my marriages because I did not face the reality in the beginning. I fear my daughter will face the same situation in her future. There are women who forgive their husbands' cheating based on careful consideration, but I wanted to forgive my husband no matter what he did because I was naive.

I have been receiving several offers for *siqa* (short term *nikah*) and marriage. Especially because of my family status, some men think lets reach her and have her as she is hard to have. I have been receiving offers from married men. I don't want to have a relationship with men now. I don't want another man to do the same thing to me which I hated. Roughly 15 men wanted to have relationships with me, some of whom were so close to me, family wise. There was a boy whom I had relationship with after divorce, he had a girl friend at the same time, he regarded himself religious, intellectual and modern. He finally got married to his girl friend.

My first fiancé sent me a message after my divorce; he sent his apologies through a facebook message, *halaliat*. I told him that I don't think about him and I have let go. We got in touch some months later through email, he told me about his life and marriage. He told me that he got me a present for women's day. I told him why he did that, he should not. I told him not to be in touch. But he later asked me to marry him and said he would divorce his wife to be with me. I have reached the conclusion that it is better to stay away from men, because they abuse you, they do not come to love you. I don't want to have relationships for now. Many men do not accept that you have a kid; it ends up in having sexual relationships. I would like to be in a relationship to feel loved. For many people it is more about sex rather than love. Now I'm happy with my situation, it is stable and smooth, I don't want to risk my position and enter into relationships. Many men abuse women and I don't like that.

Reflections on Elham's story

Elham was a friend of mine, before I decided to interview her as a resource person she became a good friend. Our friendship goes back to the period when I was running women's group and I got in touch with my friends to make a supporting network for them. At that time Elham was going through her divorce. She needed someone who could trust her, someone who could listen to her without making judgments. Her story had layers of patriarchy from my view that was the reason to choose her as a resource person. She was so open in talking about herself, and trusted me. After we decided to get in touch for Musawah's project, we started from the beginning of her story. Most of our sessions were run through skype sessions as I was away from Tehran, Iran. As time passed, Elham became stronger and I could see that in the way she narrated her story. I remember in one session she was withdrawn from talking openly, but apart from that session she talked openly. I remember once I told her please stop talking as I could not digest her pain and hardship. She said sometimes she could not believe this is her story, and she has been through these incidents. Elham was so engaged with the process of story-telling, she made a power point out of her life story with some photos and shared it with me. When she read her story she was happy of the way the story was narrated. However she said there were parts of the story that she could not talk about and she prefers to keep them for herself.

Life Story #2: Zahra – Journey of knowing myself in exile

Background

I am Zahra, 31 years old. I have a brother who is 5 years younger than me. My mom manages home stuff and she also worked as a computer engineer. My dad is also a computer engineer. I have studied medicine. It has been five years since I got married to an Iranian American man. We got married in Iran. I arrived to the USA to live with my husband two and a half years ago. He has left me and now is living with an American woman. I'm now living in Kansas in USA with my mother-in-law and my brother-in-law. I have started studying to take USMLE exams. My marriage problems helped me to know myself and led me find ways to improve my potentials.

My father as the dominant head

My father thought he is the boss at home and he has every right to rule and make commands. Because he is a man he has the right to do whatever he wants. He told us that Islam talks about equity between men and women in sexual relationships, but not other issue as far as the polygamous marriage is concerned. He tried to remarry but it was not successful. He met a woman in a class and wanted to marry her, but my aunt and my mom talked to the woman and convinced her that this marriage was not going to work, so it never happened. We were cautious all the time not to make my dad angry.

My mom and my dad's family are not religious; my parents became religious through the Islamic revolution. They started arguing with their families, mostly my dad asked people to wear *hijab*. He used to say we are right in our belief, and we have every right to tell people what is right or wrong. My dad has a bipolar disorder, he has difficulty in concentration, but he never accepted and understood that. It took him 15 years to finish his bachelor's degree.

My dad was an anxious person at times and there was always something that bothered him. My mom always used to calm him down. My mom used to tell us 'imagine your dad is having a cold and you should nurture him to feel OK. My brother and I used to care for our dad. My dad is a kind man at times, although he is an angry person some other times. When he became aggressive, he was dangerous. I remember at times he started arguing with my mom about her family or about her work. He told my mom that 'going to work is not acceptable *shari'ah*-wise for you'. When they went to their room to argue my brother and I used to stand by the door until my dad started to kick my mom, we pushed the door and entered the room to stop my dad. My dad has a house out of town, he goes there to be alone and spend some time there and calm himself. I always had the fear that my parents would get separated.

I remember once I was doing my homework, I could not solve something and started crying. My dad got angry and hit me; I fell to the ground and could not see anything for a moment. He slammed me in a way that my face became sore and his fingerprints were traceable on my face. After such angry moments when he could not control himself, he used to get redemptive and pay *diya*, or buy ear rings for compensation. Another time my dad had my nose broken, I was going to the university at that time.

Some reflections on myself

I am always cautious not to become angry. We were always told to look at our dad and see how bad it is to be angry like him. For me anger is a forbidden emotion, It always represents itself as tears, or sadness. I thought if there is a problem, it is my fault. I never represented myself, never talked, I preferred to be silent. I was too shy but could make friends, I have some good friends. I am able to communicate in person but I have difficulty in groups. People tell me I'm a patient person, may be because I am always cautious of people's feelings. I had always the fear of losing my friends. I have always been a good student. My friends did not know about my family life. I did not want my friends to know how my father reacted at the times of anger.

Because of my low self esteem I could not represent myself. People knew me as a silent and obedient person. After I entered university things got worse, I was afraid of talking to the boys because I did not want them to imagine that I liked them (they might think that I like them). I had a friendship with a girl called Leila, she was smart and sociable, her father had been martyred in Iran-Iraq war, she could gain people's attention, but in her interpersonal relationships she was dominant, she always wanted to have the last word. When we were in the second grade of university her step father kicked her out of the house, she became closer to me after that incident. She came to our house and lived with us for some time. My father was living in another apartment at that time. For some years Leila was living with us, until the last year of university. Becoming close to Leila helped me in some ways, I used to wear black clothing under my *chador* because I did not want to catch people's attention by wearing colourful clothes. I was scared of wearing colourful clothes under my *chador*. Having Leila as my close friend helped me improve my self confidence. I started wearing colourful clothes. But I remember Leila used to belittle me in groups. People recognised her treatment toward me and they pitied me. Maybe such a pattern repeated later in my life in my marriage.

I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder like my dad, I am under doctor's treatment for my problem, I am taking medicines for that. I have a low self esteem, when I become anxious I eat too much. I am now 70 Kg. while I am 150 cm. tall. I thought nobody would want me with this look. Getting married helped me gain confidence. But there are many problems in our relationship. I feel scared being close to Hamid. Many girls know how to interact with men, they might pick a fight, or do things to catch attention of men, but I can't do these things. I never did a thing to catch Hamid's attention as I was scared. Hamid says our cats are more confident than me. Hamid doesn't know about my family problems, he neither knew that I was seeing the doctor, nor about my recent medication for several months.

Having a low self esteem made me unable to manage the situation. May be I could have acted wisely. There is an acquaintance who is helping me these days, he says 'you should show your husband that you are capable'. I started being scared as I heard them warning me about *hijab*. I was scared coming out of the house, I had accepted that I cannot communicate with American people. I am scared of my husband too. I cannot talk easily with him, when he is around I become silent, I am not confident to interact with him, my mind and my tongue become locked when he is around.

In the beginning of my arrival, my husband wanted me to meet with other people while my in-laws thought it's better not to meet with others. I was not confident at that time and was scared of communication. Once we met an Indian family, I could not act as an adult in that session. The Indian man told me I should become a doctor. When I told them I'm a doctor they could not believe that. This was the first and also the last time my husband introduced me to his friends. Here in the US, being nice and adaptive is not meaningful. Once Hamid wanted to go to an academic event, he wanted to take me with him. My mother-in-law said 'I don't think Hamid would have told you to go along with him'. My father-in-law said 'as you have *hijab* it would not be good for Hamid to have you by his side'. When Hamid arrived home I told him I will not come with him, I can't, I did not tell him that his parents told me so.

How I got married

One of our acquaintances introduced Hamid's family to us. Hamid and I started to talk through the phone for one year since April 2007. Everything seemed normal and there was no problem while we were in touch through the phone. After a year and a half we decided to have marriage ceremony in Iran. We got married in August 2008 in Tehran, Iran. For two weeks Hamid's family came to Iran for visiting us and having the ceremony. Hamid's father was so thankful to us and he seemed positive. He insisted on getting back to the USA as soon as possible, and his alibi was Hamid's work in USA.

My parents paid for the marriage ceremony and they also bought my jewellery. Hamid's family were supposed to pay the expenses to my parents afterwards. The whole amount was 12 million Toman (around 4000\$). They paid half of the expenses and did not pay the whole money, they left Iran. My mother became angry because of such behaviour and she emailed Hamid the whole expenses. They did not answer my phone afterwards. I know my father-in-law was the kind of person who labelled people if they did not treat him as he expected. He used to label people as those who are not true Muslims. After we found out that they don't answer the phone because of being informed of the marriage expenses, I emailed my father-in-law as I knew he is the boss and asked him to intervene. Hamid had started arguing about some of the things that happened in the marriage ceremony according to his dad. My father-in-law said Hamid has got a cultural shock.

Hamid told me you said you wanted to simplify your life, how come you asked for jewellery?, he did not want to buy me jewellery, and he said so to convince me not to buy jewellery. He objected to spend 3.5 million toman (nearly 1,000 dollars) on jewellery. Finally I said I don't want to have jewellery and *mahr*, so the family was satisfied and let me talk to Hamid. I went to *mahzar* (registry office), and withdraw from my *mahr*, so Hamid started to talk to me after a month.

These arguments affected my relationship with Hamid, after coming to the USA all these issues in addition to the *hijab* matter affected our marriage. My father-in-law was so controlling toward Hamid, and he affected his thoughts through his words. Furthermore, financially Hamid used to spend 12,000 dollars per month on his family, due to his father's chemotherapy and other living expenses of the family.

In December 2010, I arrived to the USA to live with Hamid. My father-in-law and my mother-in-law had been living with us since we got married, in the beginning my father-in-law said because of his chemotherapy they have to live with us, but it turned to be forever. Hamid told me because of the marriage ceremony expenses his family spent, now his parents had to live with us. My father-in-law is dead now, I am living with my mother-in-law and my brother-in-law after Hamid left me.

Captivity as a way to kill the confidence

Hamid was the main breadwinner for the family, but he used to spend it according to his father's wishes. Hamid worked the whole week, he was the on-call staff every other week, he used to come home at midnight. He had papers to write on his off days. He was not at home at all. We did not have time together. This was while I was captive at home and could not go out because I did not have a car. Here, if you don't have a car you cannot go out. Hamid had an old car when I arrived here. I got my driving licence in a week. The same day that I got my licence, my father-in-law emailed my brother-in-law that Hamid gave his car to him. I had no car until a year and a half later. I told him at least buy me a bicycle so that I can attend English language courses. He answered me, you would get in to trouble as you wear *hijab*.

I felt like I am imprisoned in a solitary confinement. I was so isolated and had no social interaction for the whole period. This ruined my self confidence. I had no relationship with Hamid, either sexual, or non-sexual. I was so tense and depressed. When we went to Iran to bury my father-in-law I went to see one of my mom's friends who was a physician. She checked me and told me how tense I was, she can feel this in my womb. She asked why I was so tense. I remember I was crying so much. I didn't feel powerful enough to ask why they are doing this to me. My ADHD was another difficulty that made me unable to study. All these ended up in having a low self esteem.

Our fragile relationship

Since I came to the US, Hamid and I had been living in a room which was by the side of my father-in-law's room. I remember we attempted to have sex three times, but we could not. Once my father-in-law came and coughed, the two other times they called us to have breakfast. Hamid could not have

sex because there was too much pressure on him. He had to work all day during weekdays, every other week he was on call in the hospital, he had other tasks, such as paper writing during the weekend. He used to come home after midnight some times. His father was sick and this had added to our difficulties.

Now Hamid says he has done *motaa (siqah)* to American woman and if he did not have his girl friend, he could not survive too much pressures on him and he had to take pills, sex would help him (Zahra was laughing while saying these things). My husband told me since the first month I arrived in USA he knew that we can't live together as partners. He said he treated me as his cousin (not as his wife), and wanted me to settle down here, study and then we become separated. He considered this kind of treatment towards me as kindness. He avoided sleeping with me and told me I snore while I don't snore. Hamid has left me and now he is living with an American woman for some months.

Hamid once said that gradually after a month or so I recognised that our marriage was not going to work, he had told his colleagues too. I decided to treat you as my cousin, not as my wife. Because of his father's sickness and Hamid being busy with stuff, we could not talk about our relationship. Hamid says I do not have self confidence, and I can't be his mate. He said 'I expected you to treat others as a strong person, as a courageous woman'. 'So I could tell others this is my wife!' Hamid tells me he doesn't like me, I need to leave. I tolerated this situation for a while, may be it was good or bad. May be such tolerance was nonsense, and made me humiliated, I was hoping acceptance may help me keep my marriage. Once I showed Hamid some pictures of Iran, we talked a bit. But he said if I talk to you it makes you believe we are close.

During the first year of our marriage things happened that now when I think of them I feel bad. Once I had cooked turnips for my husband who was sick, my father-in-law got angry 'why you used the cooker without permission? Why you didn't give the turnips to me first? Why you did not cook all the turnips?' I wanted to explain but they did not pay attention. Hamid hated his father, but when there was an argument he would not back me up in the fight against his dad, he said you only should apologise, if you don't apologise things would get messy. Hamid said we can do nothing as women are prone to submission. My pin dropped that day, what a family they were. There were other incidences such as having a cell phone contract, my father-in-law did not let Hamid include me in the family plan for my mobile phone.

My mother-in-law replaced my father-in-law after his death. I remember his mom was listening to my conversation with Hamid once. She had picked up the phone when her mobile phone rang, I recognised that she was listening. She apologised and looked ashamed of her act. In the beginning I did not know that she would harm me with her actions; I was humble and never reacted seriously to their bad behaviours. I always treated my mother-in-law nicely; I used to massage her feet and take care of her. One other time me and Hamid were having coffee at midnight when he just arrived home; his mom came and told us if we are having coffee. She acted in a way that made me have a pang of conscience. I thought poor woman, she has just had her husband buried, and we should take care of her. I was dull that I thought I am caring for her with my behaviour.

Conflicts in my husband's beliefs

It has been two years and a half since I moved to USA to live with Hamid, it has been a year that Hamid is in a relationship with a nurse, she is American, he goes on trips with her, and they have a relationship. Apparently this woman helps my husband increase his self confidence, she also helps him as a Muslim to enter the American society according to Hamid. Once he told me that we Muslims can't enter the modern world, I guess he thought so because of the way he has been brought up. He never had worn short sleeve T-shirts until he was 33 years old. Once I bought him a short sleeve T-shirt, he got angry as he said he is not going to wear it. But now he goes to the beach with short sleeve T-shirt and shorts

while his partner wears bikini. I think he is acting like this because my father-in-law used to put limitations on his sons, they were not allowed to wear anything other than suits.

Last 'Aashoora (the day of Imam Hossein's martyrdom), Hamid said he had to go to a wedding party of a family member of his partner. He got a CD of *nuheh (marsiah)*, so that he can come to the Islamic centre after the wedding, but he could not reach the Islamic centre's program. He kept crying as he was sad not to participate in the program, he had a pang of conscience because of that. I think Hamid is caught between two worlds, one is his dad's teachings, and another is his wishes to be with the American woman. Hamid can't come close to me, he says he becomes anxious when I speak. Hamid rarely comes home, when he is around me he starts itching. I think in the beginning of our marriage, Hamid felt he could not have sex with me because I make him feel anxious. It might have been because of all the pressures he had been through that he can't have sex. The American woman too has added to the difficulties.

One night I brought him soup and he liked it, he said it is delicious. It was the first time he was eating something I cooked. He told me 'I am going to a conference for two days'. I thought that he was making excuses for his absence. He said my baggage was at work, while I know it was in his partner's home. He did not pick his stuff, just his underwear. He did not pick his suit, he said I want to have casual clothing. I guess his baggage was being packed somewhere else. He said not to call, or text him as his phone bill has gone up. This was the beginning of moving out of the house for him. A week or so after that day Hamid moved to his partner's house, and never came back to sleep in this house. It has been three months since he has moved out.

Father-in-law as an exotic version of father

My father-in-law was an exotic version of my dad. If I did not know how to care for people, my father-in-law would have kicked me out of the house from the beginning. My father-in-law expected people to obey him. I was naive and never had the courage to confront him. Hamid's dad had immigrated to the USA 40 years ago from a rural area in Urumieh (a border province of Iran). He got married to an American woman. My mother-in-law was raised in a Catholic family, her brother became Muslim, and motivated his sister to become Muslim, she became Muslim too. My mother-in-law and my father-in-law got to know each other in college. While she was 18, my father-in-law was 25. They liked each other and finally got married. When political relations between Iran and the USA were affected by the USA embassy's terrorist attacks, Hamid's uncle turned back from Islam and became a Catholic priest. The political arguments in the family heated, and my father-in-law claimed that US government is *Istikbar(unjust)*. Such a situation ended up in breaking the relationships between my mother-in-law's family, and my father-in-law.

The family was so traditional in their beliefs. My father-in-law did not use to take his wife with him to places. He was a religious person; he used religion as an alibi to justify his actions. When his children confronted him, he used to say 'you should not say *ouf* to your dad', and he made them obey in this way. My father-in-law did not like my mother-in-law to accompany him because of her *hijab*. My father-in-law had cancer, he did not like my mother-in-law to go to therapy with him, he did not want people to see him with her. Once my father-in-law had an appointment on the same hospital that my mother-in-law had mammography in, but he did not let my mother-in-law go with him. Hamid hated him because of that. My father-in-law was self centred and he used religious justifications for his behaviour. Hamid provided for the family financially, my father-in-law used to tell him as he provides us with money God would be satisfied, it is *barakat* for you, if you do not do this God would be dissatisfied (*aagh*). My father-in-law did not pay for the family insurance to the US state, and he said this government is *taghoot (unjust)*, and we should not pay them money. He had the authority as he was the man of the family and the provider; he said he was right in everything he said. He viewed men as the rulers, and superior to women.

Some years ago when my father-in-law had brought his friend to the house, my mother-in-law used to keep her *hijab*, she was wearing *mantu* and trousers with *chador* for the long period of the guest's stay, her hair got mouldy as a result of wearing that *hijab* in the house. When my mother-in-law had her second baby, her husband went away to another city for nose operation, she did not have anyone for help by her side, Hamid had pneumonia, my mother-in-law was sick, she asked for help from her gynaecologist, the gynaecologist's reception helped her until my father-in-law got back from his trip. My mother-in-law feels like 80 year old people. She keeps saying 'I can't do this', she expects others to help her, she feels naive and incapable of doing things.

Women's clothing as the subject of controversy

One time some Iranian women wanted to meet with me, my father-in-law told them no she can't, she is busy studying. He told me these women will corrupt you. After my father-in-law's death, the Iranian women told me they had not met with my mother-in-law before. She used to wear *chador* when my father-in-law was alive, but now she wears T-shirt and trousers. I remember once we had a guest, my mother-in-law put a *chador* on her face while she was wearing *mantu* and trousers, she did not say hello and passed by. She had a red face as she passed the guest. I realised how much she was oppressed by her husband! My mother-in-law was very shy when I entered their home, but she gradually got better. She did not know how to use cards for payment. I remember after her husband's death in the ceremony she used to tell me 'come and sit by my side, I cannot talk to people'. She never answered the phone. She used to tell me not to go out to check the mail box because neighbours might tease us because of my *hijab*. She did not let me go to take the trash out of the house, we had to wait for my father-in-law, or Hamid to come and do it. Once I put the bins out of the house, and my father-in-law told me off.

My father-in-law's domination affected his sons, they don't want their wives to wear *hijab*. This is a paradox for them, they think *shari'ah* tells women to wear *hijab*, but having *hijab* in the American society is challenging. My brother-in-law married an American woman, she wore *hijab* for the sake of my father-in-law for a while, but she never became Muslim. I wear *hijab*, but Hamid is embarrassed to go out with me. One time we came across his colleagues and he ran away from them, he said he does not want them to know that his wife wears *hijab*, they might tease him if they know that. He kept telling me it's scary to wear *hijab*, be aware! He did not feel confident with me because of my *hijab*. My father-in-law used to preach people about what *shari'ah* says, *hijab* was one of the things he talked about. When it came to them to follow what they have been preaching about, they got stuck in their conflicting wishes. Hamid said he used to hate his dad because he did not take my mother-in-law with him anywhere because of her *hijab*. But Hamid himself became like his father and did not want to accompany me because of my *hijab*.

How am I doing these days?

Now I know what I should do, there is a door open to my future, either with Hamid or without him. When Hamid asked me about medical stuff, I could not remember things, he did not like it, he might have thought 'What do you know? What have you learned?' I could not present myself in the professional field as a physician. I always represented myself as care provider. Hamid told me: 'I expected you to show yourself as a physician, not as a maid!'

Now I am having methamphetamine for my ADHD and I feel better. I am getting support from a male acquaintance whom we call uncle. I'm calm as I can't do anything. I just want to be satisfied with myself and do whatever I can, that's why I have stayed with Hamid. I'm having Adderall, the medicine can't be found in Iran due to sanctions against Iran. Now I feel better with the medicine, I prefer to stay in US and study.

I am slow these days in doing everyday's routines. It takes a long time to get up and wash my face. It has been three weeks that I wanted to clean my room. I know that these are symptoms of depression.

I am passing stages of a person who is going to die, first denial, then anger, negotiation, sadness and then surrender. Now, I'm at the stage of sadness. I hope I can pass this stage and move to acceptance. If I can accept, I would suffer less from the pending divorce from my husband. I thought my sadness and stress is because I am naive, but now I have recognised that it's important to let your emotions flow and be kind to yourself, your mind and body. If you can do so you are strong. You cannot tell your mind 'don't think about it' or 'suppress your emotions, either positive or negative'. I am a human being not a robot, if I explore myself gradually; I had to be kind to myself and try to feel better, to be strong. I will do whatever to stay strong, although I'm full of tension. But a strong Zahra would appear after all this stress and pressure, I promise. I have plans, I am not just going to talk about them. I am going to have resolutions for some weeks. I'm having resolutions according to a weblog. The weblog's writer would send you weekly resolutions and you are supposed to do them and gain scores for those actions. It has been 6 months since I have started to change my life. Because I did not have anything to rely on, I could not defend myself at times when Hamid said humiliating things to me. Hamid used to ask me medical questions to see if I know much or not. I could not answer, and I could not defend myself before because I did not have confidence. Now I know that I have a problem, and now I'm facing the problem by getting treatment. I have started changing my life.

My mom wanted to come to the US but her passport got lost for a while in the process of visa issuance and she could not come. I asked her not to come because although I don't have a good condition, I'm settled down. I want to study and finish my books for the exams. If my mom arrives, things would change due to the divorce. I will not be able to study. I could have got a place for my mom and visited her without telling my mother-in-law. But it would be hard for my mom to come and be away for a while. She has many responsibilities in Iran such as taking care of my aunt who has Multiple Sclerosis. Hamid came to me two weeks ago and said when should we go to the court for divorce. He has got Islamic beard and he said *Inshallah*. I showed him that I am still studying and I need to get my citizenship. He said I cannot wait till then. He said he wanted to give me 14 gold coins, not to spoil my rights Islamic wise. He said he would give me half of his money, but the way he counts his assets is not right according to a lawyer I consulted with. I told Hamid we would talk about money issues later.

Reflections on Zahra's story

I became acquainted with Zahra through skype sessions which were organised by me in order to help women in knowing their emotions. Zahra narrated her story in a session. Everybody was shocked hearing her story. She told her story in a calm manner with no emotions. I decided to choose her as a resource person. She was open in talking about her story, she trusted me and opened up easily. After a while throughout the story narration, she told me she is experiencing different emotions like anger, sadness, rage, calmness, etc. She wisely recognised herself going through different stages of dealing with hardship; denial, anger, negotiation, sadness and acceptance. She started to be kind to herself and accept her emotions. To be strong, one needs to recognise his/her feelings and his/her thoughts, according to Zahra.

Zahra is a strong woman, in the beginning she was not confident enough but through her experience she became a strong person who could confront her harsh situation. During the months that I have been in touch with Zahra, I have learned a lot about cruelty that might silence women. Zahra's condition as she is living in exile was special. The mechanism that works through control and patriarchy was evident in Zahra's case. In childhood, she was the victim of her father's abuse, as a grownup, she started facing abuse in other ways from her father-in-law, and from her husband.

I tried to support her as far as I could through email and skype sessions. She was so thankful that I kept in touch. Our transactions were based on friendship and trust, we felt like friends. She was happy that I heard her story with no judgments or advices. I could see her change through these months. Her confidence kept improving and she started to focus on her needs and her goals, apart from her hard condition and limitations. She gradually found her way through the hard time she had.

In the email she sent some months after the interview, she was worried not to make any harm on the image of Islam. After reading her story she was satisfied that we are not harming anything, or anyone. I assured her that Musawah's project is about showing the reality of women who are facing challenges and the way they handle their situation.

Life Story #3: Nasibah – Education as an escape from economic traps

Background

There are three children in our family. I am 18 years old, and I am the third kid. I have studied accounting in the vocational school. We live in Khavaran⁸.

My dad is a shoe maker. My mom and my dad are cousins; they got married according to the traditions that say cousins' marriage is sacred. They don't love each other. My mom does not dare object to my dad, if my father does not want to give money, he would not, no matter how much one tries to convince him. He says women's word is not worth anything, he says men's word is worth listening to.

We are three kids, two daughters and one son. My dad is despotic in his words, he is backward in his beliefs. My dad does not listen to my mom. They are living together because of their kids, they do not go for divorce because they think divorce is shameful.

I played in the streets most of my childhood. I was a naughty kid. My sister is 7 years older than me, and my brother is three year older. My brother is not at home most of the time. He works as a courier (mail man), at night he goes to the mosque as he is *basiji* (*informal army member*), and participates in youth programs of the mosque.

Struggling with economic hardships due to unemployment

I came here to Narges institute through a friend, I was desperate to find a job. I heard that here they give certificates to people after they pass some courses. I want to find a job and such certificates would be helpful. I need to find a job, rather than ask for money from my dad. My dad does not let me go to the university. He says he does not spend money after high school. I liked my major and wanted to continue my studies but I can't. I have studied accountancy... I was a good student in high school ... If I can get certificates from here I am able to find a job. However, I am not that optimistic in finding a job. I have been seeking jobs such as receptionist, sales person and also in a factory. When you go to find a job, they ask if you are married or not, they consider your looks and care about your appearance. They sometimes say come and work for us for a while so that we see how you work. They want to abuse you. They don't care what qualifications you have. I have been working for my placement period in document registration for three months. They wanted me to continue my job without paying me money. These days people misuse you, everybody is thinking of her/himself.

Education as a way to flee from biological labels

Here in Narges institute, I have started to learn how to interact, and how to talk in an assertive way...If I learn how to interact effectively, my dad can't treat me badly. I like all the classes here, language classes, drawing, computer, new vision in life. In our classes we learn how to interact effectively, how to represent yourself freely. We have pottery, health and wellbeing, and creative art classes too. We have classes every day except for Tuesdays and Fridays, from 8 am to 4 pm. When I am home after a little rest I do house work.... 'Because you are a girl, you have to do the house work' my dad believes. A woman is a maid/servant in my dad's view. A woman should not ask money from her husband in my dad's belief, 'what do you need the money for' he always asks?

My dad does not have money when we ask him. He says other girls work and provide money for their families. When I tell him I want to work, he says no! I feel imprisoned! He treats us as his prisoners. People don't believe he acts like this with us as he is double faced.

Getting married is a misfortune for many women, but not for me, as I have limitations now living under my dad's domination. When we get married our liberty becomes restricted. My dad doesn't let me go

⁸ A low income section of Tehran.

out with my friends, he used to ask me about Narges institute classes in the beginning as well. He used to ask me why I go to these classes. Narges institute's classes have been so useful for me, in the beginning when I came here, I thought I might be mistaken or my words were not worthy, I could not talk, I was shy, I was afraid of talking. Teachers and facilitators here helped me a lot, they would help you increase your self confidence, and they help you talk. But I didn't think these classes help me with my dad, he doesn't care what you say because he is a man, and you are a woman.

Wali permission for marriage

My dad does not consent to my marriage with a boy I know for years. He says it's OK if the family calls, but he doesn't agree to marriage. We traditionally marry at early age. It has been four to five years since I have known the boy. He is twenty one years old. He wants to get married to me. He is working and now earns 700,000 toman (nearly 350 dollars) a month, but he is changing his job to have a better salary and also to have insurance. My mom thinks I am his bride, everybody agrees except my dad. My dad knows that the boy and I are together, but he acts like he doesn't know. My brother is getting married too. He doesn't say anything regarding our marriage.

My father treats my mother and I as maids, like Cosset in Les Miserables. He doesn't listen to us because we are females. My brother is able to go out, to go to the mosque, but I can't because I am a girl. I decided to break up with my fiancé, but his mother said he couldn't tolerate separation, he likes you so much. She suggested that we stay engaged until my dad changes his opinion.

Reflections on Nasibah's story

I know Nasibah through the Narges institute. As I did not know her in person, I could not build a relationship of trust, as it was the case in the two other cases, Elham and Zahra. Nasibah's story was different from the other two as we did not know each other, and I was seen as a strange person. Nasibah kept talking about the way her father treated her and her economic situation. I could not lead her to avoid talking repetitively about her economic situation. As I led the two other stories smoothly with the least intervention, Nasibah's story needed more structure. It was hard to motivate the resource person to talk freely while structuring the data.

Individual story analysis

Analysis of Elham's story

Qiwamah and wilayah issues

According to the family law, a husband can divorce his wife whenever he wants. Elham's husband had the unilateral right for divorce, and although he had left her and did not pay *nafaqah* and *mahr*, he had not divorced her, and he used his right for divorce as a playing card. For a long period, Elham was waiting for her husband to come back, she was silent at times and objected to her situation at other times. Ultimately, Amir divorced Elham whenever he wished. One of the active measures taken by Elham was claiming her *mahr* and *nafaqah* through legal force.

Elham's father was *wali* in the law and by default he was the person who agrees or disagrees with his daughter's marriage, and he did so. The timing of the marriage was defined according to Elham's father's approval not hers'. His father was the person who motivated her not to divorce Amir for a while and stay with him. After coming to her father's house, she was going to therapy session far from the house which was prohibited by her father as *wali*.

This highlights men's right to control women's mobility by the law. Elham mentioned how much she had problems in her husband's house for going out of the house. She mentioned how much liberated she felt the first night of going to her father's house, as she could go and buy pills for herself without any argument. Elham considered another point about freedom in mobility. She mentioned once, her husband took the baby out of the house and stayed for hours out without her consent. The double standard for men's freedom in mobility, comparing to women's restriction is considerable here. Elham had little power in challenging her right for mobility while she was living with her husband.

Men's right to polygamy in the law has affected family power dynamics. As Elham's husband had relationships out of his marriage, she used to object and argue at times, but at other times she was the silent woman. Such a power dynamic is worth considering that makes the man dominant at times and submitted at other times. Elham had problems accepting the fact that her husband has relationship with other women, but she always kept her hope for reconciliation and getting back to her husband. Mecca trip was an opportunity for having him back but it did not work out as Amir was withdrawn from accepting Elham as his wife.

Elham mentioned being kicked once in the street after an argument with Amir. According to some classical interpretations, a man may treat his wife in ways that makes her behave. Legitimacy of kicking the wife may come from traditional interpretations of verse 4:34. Elham did not mention how she felt after being kicked, she said this was a start for sleeping separately, but seemingly she did not react seriously toward such an attitude of her husband. Elham mentioned her father's reaction toward kicking as he hired an advocate and showed his disapproval. Engagement of Elham's father in this issue leads us to the importance of physical abuse.

Divergences from *qiwamah* and *wilayah*

Amir did not provide for his wife, he did not give *nafaqah*, and neither did he support his daughter. Elham was the woman who went to work since she got back to her father's house. As the husband did not support the wife financially, the reality of Elham's life shows how a man can be irresponsible. The traditional perception of men as 'the breadwinners' is challenged here. This necessitated Elham to seek jobs and provide for herself and her daughter. Although her father could afford her, but she chose to become independent from her father. This demonstrates the active agency of Elham in economic matters.

Another active measure that Elham took, was claiming *nafaqah* and *mahr*. The possibility of claiming *nafaqah* and *mahr* is a power in the hands of women. Elham claimed her *nafaqah* and *mahr* and used it as a power axis when she found out that Amir is not going to live with her and their marriage is not going to work.

Development in her sense of self and relation to the world and external authority

In the beginning of her problems, Elham was blaming herself for the things that happened. She said she felt it was her fault that her husband had gone with other women. Gradually, she started to cope with the situation and get over her anger, then she began seeing her husband's faults. In the end, when she wanted to claim her *mahr* and *nafaqah*, she was an autonomous person who went after her rights, and did not want to bargain her right for any unreliable promises from the part of her husband.

Elham referred to her husband and her father as active agents during her 10 years of marriage, her mother-in-law was another active person in her story too. She was reliant on *zikr* and *doa* in the beginning of her marriage, and did not recognise her agency and power as a thoughtful person who can make choices and take active measures. But as we go through her story, in the end she is the active agent who claims her *mahr* and decides to cut her husband off her life. Finally she goes to therapy sessions to find out what went wrong in her life, and she starts a journey to know herself and reflect on the problems from a new angle.

Elham's perception of religious authority changed over 10 years time. In the beginning, she ritualistically obeyed whatever had traditionally been said. She used to ask for God's help through *zikr* and pray, but after her marriage problems, she started to doubt and reject whatever came from common sense religion. Her confrontation with the reality of life led her to rethink in traditional beliefs and seek for alternative options.

How her story is reflective of common issues in the national context of Iran

Men's unilateral right for divorce is an issue for Iranian women. A husband can divorce his wife whenever he wants. Thus a woman may face divorce any time, under any circumstances. Another issue, is women's claim for *mahr*. As we see in Elham's story, her husband told her 'you have to earn your divorce', meaning you should withdraw from claiming your *mahr*. Some women use their *mahr* as a bargaining card, but if a woman does not have *mahr*, she may not negotiate. Women who have considerable amounts of *mahr*, and their husbands accept to pay and are rich enough to pay, are lucky. The government has put new rules and regulations to limit women's manoeuvre in this regard.

Another issue is kicking. Women may be hit easily, or they may face harsh abuses from men. Seemingly it is regarded normal for men to act aggressively as they are seen as the powerful mates. Women are vulnerable when abuses happen, especially if they are financially dependent on their husbands and had no place to go. Elham resisted her husband once she was kicked, but we should consider cases that are forced to stay with their husbands and tolerate abuses.

Having relationships with more than one woman was accepted in Elham's family. Men's right for polygamy under *sigha* or *aghd nikah* is an issue which needs to be taken into account. Besides, Elham mentioned she had received proposals from married men after her divorce. She came to the conclusion that almost all of the men are after their sexual pleasure, and commitment to the relationships are impossible to hold from the part of men.

Analysis of Zahra's story

Qiwamah and wilayah issues

In Zahra's case announcing *talaq* happened unilaterally by her husband in a secret manner. He did not even bother to inform his wife that he had decided their marriage is not going to work. Giving men the right to divorce their wives whenever they want, opens the door for men to flee and justify their unreasonable behaviours. Zahra was trying to make her marriage work, while her husband did not care about the relationship from an early point. Zahra did not argue with Hamid and accepted whatever came from him. It may be said that obedience of Zahra contributed to the situation. Hamid did not bother explaining his new relationship and justified it religiously as *motaa* or *sigha*. Zahra started to change her attitude gradually after she believed that her husband will not stay in the relationship. We should not forget that although Zahra faced her husband's abandonment, she decided to stay in the USA and study for her own sake and future.

In Zahra's marriage, the *wali's* position of her father-in-law is recognisable. Zahra mentioned his objection to some issue of the marriage ceremony, and also his negotiation afterward. Zahra had accepted that he was the head of the house, and that he defined rules and regulations. Zahra did not argue with her father-in-law, like other members of the family. She chose to submit to his controlling behaviour. She said "If I had not been adaptive, I would be kicked from the house since the beginning". Zahra's action were controlled, either she wanted to cook turnips, or have sex with her husband. The patriarchal system of the in-law's family had affected Zahra and Hamid as the least powerful members of the bigger family.

Men's sexual needs should be satisfied through the marriage in exchange for providing women financially. Hamid's sexual needs were prioritized as he decided to go and seek another person to have relationship with. Here comes the question: how about Zahra's needs. Seemingly women's sexual pleasure is dismissed; while men's right in this regard comes first. Such a condition contrasts with the fact that women are seen as creatures whom their sexual drive should be controlled to safe guard the society.

Divergence from qiwamah and wilayah

In the law, the *wali's* role in decision making, and problem solving is given to men who are regarded as head of the household. In Zahra's story, her father's role as a decision maker is not clear, she told us about being kicked by her dad, and also his attempt for having a relationship out of his marriage, but nothing more about playing *wali's* role. According to Zhara, her mother was successful in her work, not her father, and they both provided for the family. It might be said that authority of her father is evident in the abuses he made of the family members.

As Zahra mentioned, Hamid was the breadwinner of the house. Although he provided for the family, his father was head of the family and Hamid did not have a word regarding decision making. In other words Hamid was the provider of the family without having any authorities to make decisions. The bigger family had dynamics which affected the nuclear family.

Development in her sense of self and relation to the world and external authority

Zahra, with the help of the therapist, started to explore more about herself. She was digging her past to find out the roots of her problematic marriage. She was more cautious about herself and dismissed recognising Hamid's problems subtly. She spoke about how her father's aggressive attitude affected her in being withdrawn from claiming her rights. In narrating her story, she was more concerned about her father-in-law's influences on her marriage. It might be said that three men were the main players in her story. She gradually started to recognise her role. In the beginning, she was passive and accepted whatever came from her in-laws but at the end, she decided to negotiate with Hamid about her rights for the divorce. She did not leave Hamid's house as she wanted to study for her own's sake.

How her story is reflective of common issues in the national context of Iran

Men's right for divorce is unilaterally contributing to depriving women of their rights. When a man like Hamid decides that he is not going to stay in his marriage, the wife would be left empty handed. If a man leaves his wife and does not want to live with her, the woman can not do anything. Men's right for *sigha* or *motaa* exacerbates the problem, and would marginalize women in claiming their rights.

The *wali's* role in defining right and wrong is another issue to be considered. As Zahra mentioned before marriage, her father was the dominant person at home. Her father's aggressive behaviour added to the abuses she faced. After marriage, her father-in-law as the ruler of the house abused her and made her life difficult. There are women in Iran who are facing abuses from their fathers, fathers-in-law, or grandfathers under the name of *wilayah*.

Zahra did not have *mahr* as her in-laws forced her to withdraw from having *mahr*. Women who do not have *mahr* and do not work, can not provide themselves after divorce. Claiming *mahr* is a way to survive financially for women who can not afford their lives after divorce.

Hijab is one of the issues that matter when women's rights are considered. Women who are living in diasporas have a different relation with hijab, comparing to those who are living under Islamic states which enforce dress code. Zahra had a two sided pressure, one from her father-in-law who expected her to wear *hijab*, another from the mainstream American context and the need to integrate in the society. Hamid as the second generation, had an ambiguous relation with *hijab*. On the one hand he knew that women should wear hijab, on the other hand not only he could not afford supporting his wife, but also he kept warning her about wearing *hijab*.

Hijab as a tool to control women's sexuality should be taken into account. For women who are living under Islamic states, forcing women to wear *hijab* is a representation of women's submission to man-made rules. There is a difference between women's choice over hijab, and forcing them to follow the dress code to safe guard the society. In Iran, women are not free to choose their dressing.

Analysis of Nasibah's story

***Qiwamah and wilayah* issues**

Nasibah's father was playing the *wali's* role in her marriage agreements, but he was not economically providing the family according to Nasibah. while she could not marry her fiancé, she was a girl living with her parents, who could not find a job and she had financial difficulties in her parents' house. Although she mentioned that getting married is a misfortune for women, she wanted to marry to get out of her trap. She told me she was not allowed to go out with her friends, or spend time with them as her father disapproved.

Divergence from *qiwamah* and *wilayah*

Nasibah's father was not providing for the family. She mentioned how her father was dominant and at the same time not providing the family. He expected his daughter to work and bring money to the house, rather than supporting the family. Nasibah could not go to the university as her father did not want to pay the tuition fee. She said she was a successful student in high school, and she was hoping to find a job after getting qualifications from the Narges institute.

Development in her sense of self, and relation to the world and external authority

Nasibah was a girl who could not interact well and represent herself. She mentioned if she learned how to interact effectively, her dad could not treat her badly. She liked Narges institute's classes and

she started to develop her abilities and believe that she can make changes in her life. Nasibah told me a woman is a made from her dad's view. She needed to move from this position, to a woman who believes in herself and her potentials.

How her story is reflective of common issues in the national context of Iran

Nasibah could not find a job and she had financial difficulties. In countries with economic problems, when women have restrictions being employed, the role of the father as the financial head of the household becomes highlighted. Such a power joins male domination in its socio-cultural aspect. Thus it is hard for women to find ways to negotiate, or flee from control.

The *wali's* consent for marriage is another issue to be considered. In Nasibah's case everybody agreed for the marriage except for her dad. The *wali's* agreement for a girl's marriage may cause women to lose their control over choice for marriage. There are many girls who are facing forced marriage because of their father's role in dominating the marriage.

Overall analysis

Commonalities

Elham's dad was supportive of her, but at the same time he was her *wali* and directed her to the good, from his own view. Elham's dad was the person who pushed the marriage. Although she said she needed more time to think about the suitor, her dad said let's do it. Her dad was also the person who was against her moving out of Amir's house, he encouraged her to wait a bit. After the divorce, her dad said she can not go out of town for having therapy sessions. Zahra's father-in-law played such a role, as he was the director when she had problems with her husband after marriage. He also defined right and wrong in the house, and further in her private issues such as going to an academic event. Nasibah's father was also the person who defined what she should do. He was against her marriage to the boy she loved, while he was financially controlling the family members.

Elham experienced violence of her husband as he hit her once. Zahra experienced violence from her dad as he used to hit her at times. She had experienced watching her mom being kicked by her father. Such experiences may have affected her in approaching her husband, as she was so cautious not to confront people. Zahra was also experiencing milder violence from her husband as he abandoned her. Zahra's father-in-law abused her in a more subtle way. Nasibah did not mention violence in her family, but the way she talked about her dad may imply that she experienced domestic abuse.

Hijab was an experience mentioned by Elham and Zahra. Elham mentioned how she related her *hijab* to God's wishes. Elham wanted to cover her body as she found it something God likes her to do. Her husband did not ask her to put on something, which is regarded more protective. Zahra mentioned *hijab* as something her husband's family had a specific idea about. While men in the family followed the father's idea that 'women should cover their bodies', they did not support women in the society and left them abandoned.

All the three women tried to work their relationships. Elham waited 5 years for her husband to get back to her. Zahra waited two and a half years for her husband to come back. Both of the women put their energies and time in order to have their husbands back. While Elham was actively engaged in such a task, Zahra's attempt may be seen as inactive. Considering her limitations in exile, Zahra's action can be recognised as the practical things that can be done. Nasibah mentioned that she attends Narges institute's classes so that she can learn how to talk to people, or how to convince others to listen to her. Such a thing may be regarded as her efforts to solve her problems with her dad.

Elham and Zahra mentioned how their in-laws were using religious alibis for justifying patriarchy or despotism. Elham mentioned how much religious her in-laws were, while they did not pursue her rights. In the case of Zahra, the shadow of religious justification is much more apparent. Zahra experienced harsh situations, which were justified under God's will. Zahra's in-laws interfering in her private issues, such as attending an academic event, or intimate moments with her husband are important to focus on. These interferences are also traceable in matters such as *hijab*, which may be a personal choice, or house works like cooking a turnip. Nasibah does not mention religious justification, her story may lead us to follow some socio-cultural roots of controlling behaviour of men as head of the family.

Zahra and Elham both moved from blaming themselves into reflection on their problems as autonomous actors. In the beginning of their problems, they were waiting for their husbands to get back and do something, but gradually they started to engage independently, either with working or studying. Their stories represent women's power in dealing with difficulties as active agents. Nasibah was not hopeful in reaching into resolutions with her dad, her way of talking about her father's controlling behaviour was more desperate rather than hopeful.

Earning money was the other common ground to reflect on women's lives. Nasibah mentioned her difficulties in finding a job as a girl, while she had problems getting money from her dad. Elham mentioned how she struggled with financial difficulties. She cited how she sold her babies' nappies to survive economically. Zahra too had problems as she was in exile and could not have income as an immigrant; she had to live in the same house with her mother-in-law, as she needed support and could not make ends meet.

Dominant *qiwamah* and *wilayah* issues

Seeing men as the providers of the family while women are supposed to provide care and sexual satisfaction for men, is the root of inequality. Elham did everything she could to protect her marriage, but she was not the decision maker of the family and she lost everything she had put in her relationship. Her husband and her father were in charge of the main issues including divorce. Elham had to wait so long to have the green light from her dad to terminate her marriage. Elham's economic activities may be regarded as actions made to be released from submission. Zahra experienced such a dynamic in another way. She had learned to be the care provider as a mother for the family, and she did so but she ended up not being appreciated for her doing. Instead, Zahra was told by her husband that she was not worthwhile. Hamid expected Zahra to be active socially rather than be a maid at home. Paradoxically, Zahra was supposed to be silent when she was told to do or not to do something by the in-laws. At the end, she became active as a doctor who wanted to participate in USMLE exam. Nasibah faced such a reality as her father was the head of the household and he was the ruler of the family, *wali*. While she mentioned her father's withdrawal from providing the family, she mentioned her dad believed women are maids and should nurture at home. At the same time he told his daughter to go to work and provide for herself. Here rises the double standard for women's work outside of the house. Nasibah's taking part in Narges institute's courses may help her in negotiation with her dad to claim back her right.

Contributions in women's sense of self, and their capacity to enjoy their rights

We can see from the way women narrated their stories that all of them mostly spoke about those people who were dominant and patriarchal. In other words active agents were husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, or mothers-in-law. Those who had power in affecting women in reaching their goals. Elham had her husband and her father as those who defined right and wrong. She told us how her husband spent years before having consent for divorce while she was waiting to have her husband back. Blaming herself was another aspect of Elham's story. In the beginning she considered her share in the problem, while dismissing Amir's contribution in separation. She doubted herself rather than her husband. Zahra was much more withdrawn from blaming her husband. In the beginning, she tried to justify her husband's behaviour and seek to find the roots of the problem in her behaviour. Zahra's father-in-law was the patriarchal figure who affected her life and choices during the two years of marriage. All of her acts were controlled by the father-in-law, she had learned to be silent and obey the commands. As an immigrant who had just arrived to a new land, such a behaviour may be justifiable. After the death of father-in-law everything changed, her husband revealed that he had been seeing someone and should divorce Zahra. Zahra did not accept the divorce option and she postponed it while she had hopes in getting her husband back. She wanted to be ready for the divorce. Finally she started to study for her exams while she was still living in her in-laws' house. Nasibah's father used to put limitations on her actions. She told us how her father did not let her go out. Her *wali* did not agree for her marriage. Nasibah was waiting for her dad to have consent for marriage. Attending courses could help Nasibah in negotiating her rights with her dad.

Differentiated experiences and determining factors

Elham had a good socio-economic background. She could get her *mahr* and *Nafaqah* and could find a job. She had enough resources to resist the divorce problem and make her living after separation.

When she was kicked, her father hired an advocate to show his disapproval and limit Amir's action. Zahra who was living in a diaspora, had limitations in finding a job, she had no *mahr*. She told us how her overweight problem, and her ADHD contributed in making her more abandoned. She had no economic support and was dependant on her husband. Nasibah could not find a job and was dependant on her father's income. She was trapped in her situation as she had a low income family. She had no hopes in getting out of her trap. Education was the only way to flee from entrapment in the patriarchal situation.

Divergence on the ground as products of active negotiation

Elham negotiated her right over *mahr* and *nafaqah*, although her husband was not keen on giving her *mahr*. She claimed all her *nafaqah* which had not been given to her. Elham started working after she left her husband's home. She had no problem going out for work. Zahra told us how her husband approached her to talk about the divorce. Zahra was not in a situation to negotiate for *talaq*, she negotiated timing of the divorce and asked for more time to have her exams. She had an acquaintance's help in doing so. Nasibah had decided to attend educational courses which could help her negotiate her rights. She needed to be empowered, so that she could find ways to convince her dad to reach to her goals in the absence of economic participation.

Particular insights to inform new readings of the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*

As we see in the lived realities of resource persons, women are powerful to handle their lives. If chances are given to women they can work. In spite of many difficulties that women have, they can fight and overcome difficulties. We need to be aware of the diversity of the lived realities of women. As we see diverse angles of socio-economic situation, psychological backgrounds and religious approaches contribute in shaping women's sense of self and their efforts to challenge their realities. Some aspects of women's reality such as wearing *hijab*, is related to their ways of seeing and behaving. We need to be aware of patriarchy as a whole, which is affecting women and is represented in diverse ways.

Women need to be empowered through education and assisted through advocay for women's rights. Movements need to be built in order to help women rethink their status. Women cant confront their difficulties by individual action making. Rereadings of the sacred texts and fiqh constructs may lead to opening up horizons for transformations of women's lives. The authority of socio-religious constructs such as *qiwamah* and *wilayah* need to be broken down so that women feel empowered and abled as active agents in their lives.

Certain changes to create a workable pathway towards equality

Women's right for marriage or divorce needs to be implemented practically and legally. Women's access to work needs to be institutionalised, and limitations must be eliminated. Such changes necessitate cultural and social transformation. Since men are seen as breadwinners and women as care givers, we need to approach division of labour in an equal way to give both women and men chances for a better living. Women's mobility should not be restricted by the husband. Men should not prevent their wives from working under excuses such as family's good. Husbands and wives should not restrict women's access to education. Such changes need awareness raising, and educational interventions to clarify women's rights for themselves and also for men. Women's groups, community based educations and informal education can help us in this regard. Along with such changes from the bottom, transformation in the legislative body is needed too. Changes from above are mandatory in helping women gain their rights. Giving women equal right for divorce is at the centre of such changes. Women's right for mobility and work outside of the house are other aspects of the transformation.

Important lessons that challenge how we carry out our work and movement building

It is hard to separate cultural aspects of women's problems from the religious aspects. Seeking the religious roots of patriarchy, intersects with cultural backgrounds. We need to explore more to find which thoughts and behaviours come from religious presuppositions, and which ones come from the cultural roots.

Final reflections

The process of working on the Musawah project was a journey for me to develop my knowledge about women's ways of knowing themselves and their efforts to build their lives. They helped me to look from inside into their lives and understand their views on themselves and people around them. Challenges of women which they encounter showed me the way to picture aspects of the problematic relationships and realities. The path towards change passes through the present realities of women. These women were powerful in their own ways, they have fought their battles with their own potentials without any helps. Understanding these women was hard at times. Looking at their situation from a different point of view was challenging. Having sympathy for them was necessary as they had emotional moments while talking about their lives. I tried to understand them as they are, and feel their pains. I could not help them in any way but with listening and thinking out loud with them. In the beginning I did not know how hard it is to picture life stories of women. When it comes to religious presuppositions such a work, they become much harder. I thought resource persons could manage the way they narrate their stories, but they needed to be guided through the process of interview. There were worries that needed to be understood, and I had to fulfil the resource person's wishes that I did not know in the beginning. When Zahra expressed her worry about the way Musawah project is going to be used, I assured her that this project is about women's potentials and their realities, rather than depicting dark aspects of women's lives and their miseries. I learned a lot during the job, the way women trusted me after they became acquainted with me was surprising. It was important to them to have someone listen to their stories without judgement and advice. Nasibah did not have enough time to trust me, or she could not extract more about her life so I could not develop her story the way I did with the other two stories. Managing my emotions throughout the job was another skill I practiced in this project. Digging more of the lives of women and seeking for layers of truth was needed in this project, which I covered as I learned gradually during the job. Searching for patriarchy rather than polarizing women against men was another aspect of this work.

Appendices

Appendix A: Rivers of Life

Elham's river of life:

July 2007 Going to her parent's house	August 2007 Finding a job	November 2007 Getting her first salary, sending Homa to the nursery		
April 2008 Mecca trip, having her stuff out of Amir's house	September 2008 Settling down, evacuation of the house she used to live with Amir			
April 2009 Amir summoned to court	September 2009 <i>Nafaqah</i> court	November 2009 <i>Mahr</i> claim through taking Amir's share in market		
January 2010 Approval of Amir's conviction regarding <i>nafaqah</i>	April 2010 Arrest warrant, negotiation for <i>talaq</i>	May 2010 Moving out of Amir's home by taking her <i>jahaz</i>	June 2010 Homa went to live with his dad	November 2010 <i>Talaq</i> January 2011 Homa came back to her

Zahra's river of life:

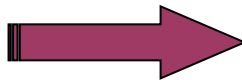
Childhood: being kicked by her father
Youth: a student with pitfalls in her lessons, and lack of confidence
August 2008: wedding in Tehran, Iran
Some problems occurred due to the amount of <i>mahr</i> and wedding celebration
December 2010: moving to the USA
April 2013: Hamid moving out of the house, going to live with his partner

Appendix B: Legal Mapping

Mapping *qiwamah* & *wilayah* in the family law and social practices, Iran

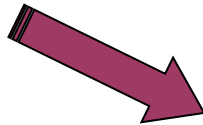
This diagram aims to trace the conceptions of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* mostly in the family law of Iran, and also civil or penal legislations. Some social practices have been concerned in the map. The family law has been under legislative revisions regarding the conservative debates around women's and family issue

1A. Being head of the household is a husband's character (1105 Civil Law)



2. In the permanent marriage, a wife's maintenance and expenses (*nafaqah*) is due to husband (1106 civil law)

1B. This is reflected in:



- * Gender quota for education (attending university disciplines follow specific gender allocation).
- * Women's employment positions are unequally low (compared to men's), besides big gap between men and women ratio of income. Women can not be appointed as judges.
- * Changing the name of 'Centre for Women's Participation and Affairs' to 'the Center of Women's and Family Affairs', which implies women's status is defined within the family as housewives.
- * Specific dress code for women and related persecutions for offenders.
- * CEDAW is waiting for approval in the State Expediency Council as a result of disagreement between the parliament and the Guardian Council, which verified it as contrary to Islamic criteria and asked the parliament to modify it.

1B. Legal rights to....

3. Share of inheritance, ownership

Women inherit from their parents or children half the share of men (906 civil law, also in practice)

In case of several children, some boys and some girls, the boy gets twice the girl (907 civil law), in social practice it is like that except when father makes a will and divides his wealth.

A woman may do what she likes with her own property and can spend her money as she chooses, if a wife spends her money on expenses that are within the husband's duty she can ask for reimbursement, if he refuses she can petition the family court

Women's right to own land is restricted when she acquires a foreign nationality by marriage

4 & 6. Control over wife/daughter/sister's autonomy

Husband can divorce his wife whenever he wants (1133 civil law). Wife can request divorce when in *Osr-o Haraj* (difficulty, a narrower condition) (1130 civil law). Husband may delegate divorce right to wife (in marriage contract), but in practice courts do not apply the right. Restricted divorce options (e.g. for *Khul'* wife should pay her husband); wife may lose right to maintenance/custody of child if she divorces through *Khul'* (also in practice)

Husband's permission required for travel outside of country; wife should live in the place that her husband defines (law and practice); *wali* required for marriage; husband can prevent wife from a job which is against family's good, his or his wife's honour (law and practice)

Right to polygamy for men is recognised, *sigha* or *motaa* (temporary marriage) is recognised in the law and social practice

5&6. Control over wife/daughter/sister's bodies

Minimum age of marriage in Iran is 13 years for girls and 15 for boys, marriage is not prohibited before that age (dependant on *wali's* authorisation) (1041 civil law, also practice)

In the law and also social practice: husband's permission required for contraception;

Marital rape not recognised;

Abortion is illegal;

Resistance to *Tamkin* (تمكين) may lead to divorce and deprivation of *nafaqah* (نفقه); withdrawal from sexual duties without legitimate excuse lead to deprivation of *nafaqah* (1108 civil)

if a father kills his child, he is not subjected to *Qisas* (قصاص) (also practice)

Woman's compensation for death is half that of man's (penal law)

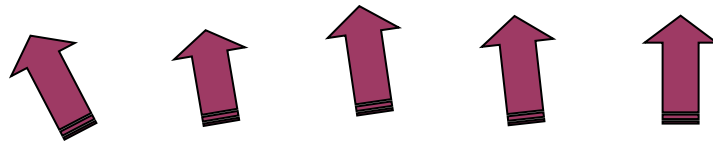
7. Guardianship of children

Husband's permission required for children's education, travel, health care (according to social norms not legal policies), and permission for marriage (of unmarried girl) due to the law (practice too);

for guardianship of the child whose parents are living apart, mother has priority until 7 years of age, older children's custody belongs to the father, however in practice mother may retain custody (if mother remarries while she has custody, the law transfers custody to the father);

if a crime happens against a child, dad or paternal granddad are in charge of claiming the legal process

Father and grandfather are '*wali ghahri*' (1180 civil)



- a) ♀ Negotiating marriage contracts
- b) Alternative practices courts applying
- c) Courts reinterpreting maintenance and obedience & other discriminatory applications of qiwama & wilaya

Legal mapping question: What are the husband's/wife's responsibilities and rights in the law?

According to civil law (1107) in the permanent marriage maintenance (*nafaqah*) is due to husband. *Nafaqah* consists of all the conventional needs and proportionate requirements according to the wife's status including shelter, clothing, food, home furniture and health expenses, etc. In social practice furnishing the home is the wife's duty. If the wife withdraws from her sexual responsibilities, without any authorized excuse, she is not eligible for *nafaqah*.

Appendix C: Interview details

Elham's interview:

First session: 31st August 2012

Second session: 7th September 2012

Third session and fourth session in October 2012

Follow ups in January

Zahra's interview:

First session: 13th December 2012

Second session: December 2012

Third session: 13th January 2013

Follow ups in February, April and June 2013

Nasibah interview:

First session: 3rd August 2012

Interview guidelines and questions:

Elham's interview:

- What were your first encounters with patriarchy? During childhood or youth, have you ever encountered patriarchy?
- What were your approach when you first faced discrimination (i.e. Elham's first engagement was cancelled)
- Apart from your share in the problematic issues (i.e. marriage difficulties), what factors were important in causing you pain?
- When you mentioned that you did not wear the tight mantu because you wanted to be thankful of God, what did you mean exactly?
- When did your marriage start to become problematic?
- When did you get out of Amir's house?

Zahra's interview

- What was your childhood like? (Tell me about your school time)
- What do you like to talk about?
- How are things with you?
- How did you become acquainted with Hamid? How did you know him and get married?
- How did your marriage start to fracture?
- What was the reaction of your mom and dad after your husband's family requested you to withdraw from your *mahr*?
- How did your mother-in-law and your father-in-law get married in USA?
- Would you tell me about Hamid's approach to *hijab*? What was his stance toward your *hijab*?

Nasibah's interview:

- What does your father do?
- How is your mother and father's relationship?
- How was your childhood like? Were you raised in a family that discriminated boys against girls?
- What did you study?
- Do you work? Why not?
- Do you want to marry?
- What does your brother say about your marriage?
- What do you learn in Omide Mehr?

Glossary

Aagh: bad consequences of disobeying parents

Barakat: blessing

Basiji: groups of young people who join a specific army, as its public and informal body recruits from ordinary people and organises them

Chador: clothing which covers all the body parts from head to toe

Dia: compensation for loss or death

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence

Fitna: corruption

Halaliat: apologise for a bad thing done

Hijab: clothing and cover for hair

Inshaallah: God willing

Jahanam: hell

Jahaz/Jahizieh: tools and furniture for the house which the bride brings to the groom's house

Khul': Divorce initiated by woman

Mahr: brideprice, money or goods supposed to be given to the bride's family prior to the marriage

Mantu: clothing which is the public dress code in Iran

Motaa (siqa) temporary marriage

Nafaqah: Maintenance, living expenses given to the wife by husband

Nikah: marriage

Nuha (marsiah) religious rhythms for grieve

Omide Mehr is a charity to provide social welfare supports and educational services for girls with financial difficulty or those who have run away from home.

Ouf: bad words, disobedience

Qisas: Retaliation, punishment

Sigha: temporary marriage

Taghoot: cruel unjust government

Taieb: Pure person, not having relationship before marriage

Tamkin: obedience

Wali ghahri: guardian

Zikr: Prayer recitation