

An Analytical Study of Mahr with Reference to the Prophet's Wives (Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt)

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Abstract

Islam places great emphasis on safeguarding the rights of women, and this is particularly evident in the repeated Qur'anic injunctions regarding the payment of Mahr—a mandatory gift or amount promised by the husband to the wife at the time of Nikāḥ (marriage contract). Whether a man fulfills his desires within the lawful framework of Sharī'ah (i.e., through marriage) or unlawfully through adultery, some form of expenditure is involved. However, the institution of Nikāḥ provides discipline, moral structure, and social responsibility, unlike the chaos of illicit relationships. In Islamic jurisprudence, Mahr is a wājib (obligatory) financial obligation upon the husband, underscoring the value and dignity of the woman. The Sharī'ah is so meticulous in protecting this right that even if Mahr is not specified, or is mutually waived at the time of marriage, it still remains obligatory under certain conditions. This study aims to analyze the concept and application of Mahr with specific reference to the noble wives of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)—the Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt—drawing from the Qur'an, Sunnah, and classical Islamic jurisprudence. By examining their examples, the article highlights the spiritual, legal, and social significance of Mahr in Islamic marital ethics.

Keywords: Mahr, Nikāḥ, Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt, Women's Rights in Islam, Islamic Marital Law

Introduction

The institution of marriage (nikāḥ) holds immense significance in Islam, serving not only as a legal contract but as a deeply spiritual and moral covenant. Among the various components that define the Islamic marriage contract, mahr (also spelled mehr) stands out as a vital obligation that embodies the dignity, respect, and rights of women. Far from being a mere cultural practice, mahr is mandated by Islamic law (Sharī'ah) and is firmly rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah. It is not simply a financial transaction but a symbol of a man's commitment to his wife and an acknowledgment of her autonomy and worth.

The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the payment of mahr as a woman's right and a necessary component of a valid marriage contract. In Surah al-Nisā', Allah commands: "And give the women [upon marriage] their [bridal] gifts graciously" (Qur'an 4:4).¹ The term used in this verse, ṣaduqāt, is one of several terms employed in the Qur'an to refer to mahr, highlighting its moral and spiritual dimensions in addition to its financial aspect. Islamic jurists have interpreted this command as farḍ (obligatory), indicating that failure to fulfill this obligation violates the core ethics of an Islamic marriage.²

Historically, mahr has served as a safeguard for women's financial security, especially in pre-modern societies where economic dependence on male guardians was common.³ It ensured that women retained some form of financial independence and protection, especially in the event of divorce or widowhood. It is also noteworthy that mahr is not a bride price or payment for ownership, but a contractual right that affirms the woman's dignity and position in the marriage. It must be agreed upon by mutual consent and is enforceable under Islamic law.⁴

This paper explores the institution of mahr through a focused analytical study of the marital arrangements of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), specifically with his noble wives, the Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt (the purified wives). Their lives offer exemplary models of Islamic values in practice and provide crucial insights into the Prophet's implementation of divine commands regarding women's rights.⁵ By examining the Prophet's dealings with his wives and the mahr amounts assigned to them, this study seeks to bridge the scriptural injunctions with historical realities. The study will begin by defining mahr both lexically and terminologically, followed by an overview of its legal status in Islamic jurisprudence. It will then examine the Qur'anic vocabulary related to mahr, such as *ṣaduqāt* and *niḥla*, and how classical exegetes like al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī and al-Ālūsī have interpreted these terms.⁶ Furthermore, the Sunnah will be analyzed to demonstrate how the Prophet upheld and emphasized the payment of mahr, even in cases involving minimal financial capacity, thus reinforcing the spiritual and legal obligation of this institution.⁷

Through detailed case studies of the Prophet's wives—such as Khadījah, 'Ā'ishah, Ḥafṣah, Juwayriyyah, Ṣafiyyah, and Umm Ḥabībah—this paper will shed light on the diversity in the types and amounts of mahr paid. It will also show how the practice of mahr adapted to different social contexts while remaining consistent with Islamic principles. For example, the mahr of Khadījah (RA) is reported to have included both monetary and non-monetary forms, reflecting her unique status and financial independence. Similarly, the mahr for Juwayriyyah and Ṣafiyyah included their emancipation from slavery, showcasing the moral elevation of the institution of marriage in Islam.⁸

This exploration is especially relevant in today's context, where misunderstandings and cultural distortions about mahr persist. In some regions, the mahr is reduced to a symbolic formality with nominal amounts that fail to meet the ethical objectives outlined in Islamic sources. In others, it is inflated beyond reasonable means, becoming a source of financial burden and social pressure. By revisiting the prophetic model and grounding our understanding in authentic sources, this study aims to revive the balanced Islamic approach to mahr.

In many Muslim communities today, the true meaning and importance of *mahr* has been misunderstood. Some families treat *mahr* as a mere formality, setting a very small amount just to fulfill a ritual. Others set it so high that it becomes a burden, especially on young men who are just starting their lives. Both these practices go against the balanced teachings of Islam. In the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), *mahr* was never a source of pride or social pressure. It was always decided with wisdom, care, and fairness. This study becomes especially important in the current times when many people follow culture more than religion. It is necessary to return to the examples set by the Prophet (PBUH) and his noble wives, the *Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt*. By studying how *mahr* was given in those marriages, we can learn how to apply these teachings correctly in our lives. For example, Khadījah (RA), who was the Prophet's first wife, received a *mahr* that showed her high status and was agreed upon respectfully.⁹ In other cases, like with Juwayriyah (RA) and Ṣafiyyah (RA), the *mahr* was their freedom from slavery, which shows how *mahr* was used not just as a payment but as a way to honor and support the woman.¹⁰

The purpose of this study is to examine *mahr* based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, with a special focus on how the Prophet (PBUH) gave *mahr* to his wives. The paper will first explain the basic meaning and rules of *mahr*. Then it will look at how *mahr* is mentioned in the Qur'an, and what the scholars say about those verses. The next part will explore *mahr* in the sayings and actions of the Prophet (PBUH). Finally, the paper will give examples of *mahr* given to each wife of the Prophet, such as Khadījah, 'Ā'ishah, Ḥafṣah, Juwayriyah, Ṣafiyyah, and Umm Ḥabībah.¹¹

To support this study, both primary and secondary Islamic sources will be used. These include books of ḥadīth like *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Musnad Aḥmad*, books of Qur'anic commentary like *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*, and biographical works like *Tārīkh al-Islām* and *Ṭabaqāt Ibn Sa'd*. The paper will also include real-life observations from the local context, showing how *mahr* is practiced today.¹² This paper hopes to give a clear and simple understanding of *mahr*, using strong Islamic sources and practical examples. It will help readers see *mahr* not just as a rule, but as a beautiful and meaningful

part of Islamic marriage. The lives of the *Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt* offer the best example of how *mahr* can be applied with wisdom and justice.

Definition and Terminology of Mahr

I. Lexical Meaning of Mahr

The word *mahr* (also spelled *mehr*) comes from the Arabic root م-ه-ر (mīm-hā'-rā'). According to Arabic dictionaries, if the verb is used without a glottal stop (hamzah), it means to give a dowry. If used with hamzah, it means to receive a dowry or pay from the other side.¹³ This shows that in the Arabic language, *mahr* generally refers to the act of giving something valuable in marriage.

2. Terminological Definition of Mahr in Islamic Law

In Islamic law (fiqh), *mahr* is defined as the mandatory gift that a husband must give to his wife as part of the *nikāḥ* (marriage) contract.¹⁴ It is given in return for making marital relations lawful and is a woman's right. It can be money, property, gold, or even something symbolic (like teaching Qur'an), as long as both parties agree. Scholars agree that *mahr* is not a bride price. Rather, it is a sign of respect and responsibility. It confirms that the man values his wife and takes responsibility for his duties in the marriage.¹⁵ It is not about "buying" a woman, but about giving her honor, protection, and legal rights. Imam al-Sarakhsī says that *mahr* is obligatory (*wājib*) when a marriage contract is completed, even if the exact amount is not mentioned, or if both sides agree to marry without it.¹⁶ Later, an appropriate amount (*mahr al-mithl*) is still due based on social custom and the woman's family background.

3. Legal Ruling on Mahr in Shari'ah

The Qur'an clearly commands that *mahr* must be given. In Surah al-Nisā', Allah says:

"And give the women their dowries (ṣaduqāt) with a good heart." (Qur'an 4:4)

The word *ṣaduqāt* in this verse is used to describe *mahr*, and scholars explain that it comes from the same root as *ṣidq* (truth), showing that *mahr* represents a man's truthful and sincere intention toward his wife.⁷ Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī said that calling *mahr* "ṣadaq" means it is a true and honest gift, showing the husband's goodwill and faithfulness.¹⁷ Some other verses of the Qur'an refer to *mahr* with different words, such as *niḥla* (a gift given willingly) or *uqr* (a type of payment). All these words stress that *mahr* is something to be given with respect, generosity, and willingness, not by force or burden. Both the Arabic language and Islamic law agree that *mahr* is a compulsory gift that a husband must give to his wife. It is not just a cultural habit but a clear command in the Qur'an and an essential part of a valid Islamic marriage. It protects the woman, honors her, and reflects the moral values of Islam.

Mahr in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah

I. Mahr in the Qur'an

The Qur'an speaks about *mahr* in several verses using different terms like *ṣaduqāt*, *niḥla*, and *uqr*. These words help us understand the spirit and meaning of *mahr* in Islam.

a) The Term Ṣaduqāt

Allah says in Surah al-Nisā':

“And give the women their dowries (ṣaduqāt) with a good heart.” (Qur’an 4:4)¹⁸

In this verse, ṣaduqāt refers to mahr. According to Islamic scholars, this word comes from ṣidq (truth), meaning that the mahr reflects the husband's truthfulness and commitment. Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī explained that it is called ṣadaq because it shows the man's honesty and sincere intention toward his wife.¹⁹

b) The Term Niḥla

In another verse, Allah uses the word niḥla:

“And give the women their dowry as a free gift (niḥla).” (Qur’an 4:4)²⁰

Niḥla means a gift given happily and willingly, not under pressure. Imam al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī and Imam al-Ālūsī both said that this word highlights that mahr should not be given grudgingly or with a bad attitude, but rather as a kind gesture.²¹

c) The Concept of Willingness

Some scholars raised a question: if niḥla means a free gift, does that mean mahr is not a duty? Imam al-Ālūsī answered this by saying that although the Qur’an calls it a gift, it is still obligatory, because the wife also has rights like shelter, food, and respect. The gift idea adds kindness, but the obligation remains.²²

2. Mahr in the Sunnah (Hadith)

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) strongly emphasized the importance of giving mahr. He practiced it in his own marriages and taught his followers to do the same.

a) The Best Condition to Fulfill

The Prophet (PBUH) said:

“Among the conditions that deserve to be fulfilled the most is that by which intimate relations become lawful.”

This hadith shows that the mahr, which makes the marriage contract complete and lawful, must be fulfilled. Allāmah Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī explained that the hadith means the mahr is the most important of all marriage-related promises.²³

b) The Marriage with the Iron Ring

One day, a woman offered herself in marriage to the Prophet (PBUH). When he didn't respond, a man stood up and said, “O Messenger of Allah, marry her to me if you don't want her.” The Prophet asked him if he had anything to offer as mahr. The man said he had nothing except a garment. The Prophet said, “Look for something, even if it is an iron ring.”²⁴ This hadith teaches us that even a small gift like an iron ring can be a mahr, showing that Islam encourages mahr to be simple and affordable.

c) Teaching Qur'an as Mahr

When the man could not find anything to give, the Prophet (PBUH) asked him:

“Do you know any portion of the Qur'an?” He said: “Yes.” The Prophet then said:

“I marry her to you for the portion of the Qur’an you know.”²⁵

This shows that even teaching something beneficial like the Qur’an can count as *mahr*, especially if the man has no money. The Qur’an and Sunnah both make it clear that *mahr* is a serious and sacred obligation. It must be given willingly and kindly. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) showed through his actions that *mahr* should never become a burden, nor should it be ignored. The goal is to honor the woman, not to show off wealth or social status. Islam teaches us to keep marriage simple, respectful, and full of mercy.

Mahr of the Prophet’s Wives (Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt): An Analytical Study

This section examines how *mahr* was practiced in the marriages of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with his wives, known as the *Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt* (the Purified Wives). These marriages serve as direct and authentic models for Islamic marital conduct. By analyzing the type and amount of *mahr* given to each wife, we can better understand how Islamic principles were applied in various social and personal situations. This part focuses not just on listing facts but drawing insights from them.

Overview of the Prophet’s Practice

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) practiced what he preached. His marriages were diverse in social, economic, and political contexts. The *mahr* he gave ranged from large amounts of silver to symbolic acts of kindness, such as manumission (freeing from slavery) or teaching Qur’an. This variety shows that *mahr* is not about fixed amounts, but about sincere commitment and justice.

The most frequently mentioned *mahr* amount in the Prophet’s marriages is 500 dirhams of silver, equivalent to about 1,530 grams of silver in modern weight.²⁶ This was a moderate amount—not extravagant, but not negligible either. It became known in *fiqh* as *mahr al-sunnah* (the prophetic dowry), often recommended by scholars as a balanced standard.²⁷

Case Studies of the Prophet’s Wives

a) Khadījah bint Khuwaylid (RA)

Khadījah (RA) was the Prophet’s first and only wife for 25 years. Though exact amounts vary, some reports say her *mahr* included twenty young camels, while others mention 500 dirhams.²⁸ Since Khadījah was a wealthy businesswoman, this marriage shows that *mahr* is not just a financial transaction but a spiritual and respectful union. The Prophet (PBUH) accepted her proposal, and their relationship was built on trust and character. In Khadījah’s case, *mahr* was not the focus of the marriage—it was the Prophet’s integrity and her trust in him. This teaches that in a mature, sincere relationship, *mahr* is symbolic, not transactional.

b) ‘Ā’ishah bint Abī Bakr (RA)

The Prophet gave *mahr* of 500 dirhams to ‘Ā’ishah.²⁹ Her marriage took place in Makkah, and its spiritual importance is highlighted by the Prophet’s dream in which she was shown to him as his future wife. The simplicity of ‘Ā’ishah’s *mahr* shows that even in deeply beloved marriages, *mahr* was never inflated. It reflects moderation and a focus on inner qualities rather than material wealth.

c) Ḥafṣah bint ‘Umar (RA)

Ḥafṣah’s mahr was 400 dirhams.³⁰ She was a widow when she married the Prophet, and the marriage brought comfort to her and honor to her father, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. The lower *mahr* reflects practical flexibility. Her being a widow did not lessen her worth, but the amount suited her circumstances. This teaches sensitivity to individual contexts.

d) Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith (RA)

She was a captive from the tribe of Banū al-Muṣṭaliq. The Prophet paid her ransom and married her. Her *mahr* was her freedom.³¹ This case highlights Islam’s human dignity principle. The Prophet turned her from a captive into a respected wife. Her marriage caused her tribe’s captives to be freed as well, showing *mahr* can have social impact beyond the couple.

e) Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy (RA)

She was from a Jewish noble family and captured after the Battle of Khaybar. The Prophet freed her and married her; her freedom was her *mahr*.³² Like Juwayriyyah, Ṣafiyyah’s case shows the Prophet used *mahr* to uplift individuals from captivity to dignity. It also reflects interfaith harmony and the removal of humiliation.

f) Umm Ḥabībah (RA)

She was married to a Christian man in Abyssinia. After his death, the **Negus of Abyssinia (Najāshī)** conducted the marriage ceremony on the Prophet’s behalf and paid **4,000 dirhams** as *mahr*.³³ This was the **highest *mahr*** among all the Prophet’s wives, but it was paid not by him but by a foreign ruler. This shows *mahr* can be managed by others when done in trust and for a noble purpose, such as supporting a widow in exile.

3. Summary Table: Mahr of Azwāj al-Muṭahharāt

Wife	Type of Mahr	Amount	Notes
Khadījah	Wealth / livestock	20 camels / 500 dirhams	Based on narrations
‘Ā’ishah	Silver	500 dirhams	Standard <i>mahr al-sunnah</i>
Ḥafṣah	Silver	400 dirhams	Adjusted to her situation
Juwayriyyah	Freedom from slavery	N/A	Mahr = Emancipation
Ṣafiyyah	Freedom from slavery	N/A	Mahr = Emancipation
Umm Ḥabībah	Silver (paid by Negus)	4,000 dirhams	Highest <i>mahr</i> paid

Main Analytical Insights

- Flexibility of Mahr: The Prophet’s marriages prove that mahr can be monetary or non-monetary (e.g., freedom, Qur’an teaching). Islam values intention over amount.
- Context Sensitivity: The Prophet adjusted mahr based on each wife’s social condition, showing adaptability, not rigidity.
- Balanced Standard: The 500 dirham mahr al-sunnah shows a middle path between luxury and stinginess.
- Mahr with Social Benefit: In cases like Juwayriyyah, mahr affected whole tribes positively—an example of mahr as social justice.

Contemporary Issues and Misunderstandings of Mahr

Despite the clear guidance of the Qur'an and Sunnah, many Muslims today misunderstand or misuse the concept of *mahr*. These misunderstandings lead to either undervaluing *mahr* or turning it into a burden. Both extremes contradict the balance taught by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

1. Treating Mahr as a Formality

In some cultures, *mahr* is reduced to a token amount like a few hundred rupees or even just one rupee. This practice, while technically fulfilling the legal requirement, ignores the Qur'anic emphasis on *mahr* as a sign of respect and goodwill. The Qur'an commands believers to give *mahr* "graciously" (*nihla*) and not as a forced obligation (Qur'an 4:4).³⁴ When *mahr* becomes symbolic and meaningless, it loses its protective role for the woman, especially in cases of divorce.

2. Making Mahr Too Expensive

In other places, *mahr* is set so high that it becomes a barrier to marriage. Some families ask for large amounts of gold, cash, land, or even cars. This is contrary to the Prophet's teachings. He encouraged simplicity in marriage and once accepted teaching a few surahs of the Qur'an as *mahr* when the groom could not afford anything.³⁵ High *mahr* leads to delays in marriage, financial pressure, and sometimes even forced debt. It also creates the illusion that a woman's dignity depends on wealth, not on mutual respect and piety.

3. Custom vs. Shariah

Many times, *mahr* amounts are based more on cultural expectations than Islamic principles. In some societies, bridegrooms are judged by how much *mahr* they can afford. This pressure often leads to show-off and insincerity. This turns *mahr* into a status symbol rather than a spiritual and legal responsibility.

Analytical Summary

The key reasons behind these problems are ignorance, cultural dominance, and lack of sincere intention. The life of the Prophet (PBUH) shows us that *mahr* should be moderate, meaningful, and agreed upon with kindness. It should never be a source of pride or pain.

To solve these issues:

- *Religious education* must be promoted in communities.
- *Marriage contracts* should clearly state the agreed *mahr*.
- Scholars and *nikāḥ khawāns* must guide families toward the *sunnah* model of *mahr*.

Conclusion

Mahr is more than just a financial transaction in Islamic marriage—it is a symbol of honor, responsibility, and compassion. The Qur'an commands its payment with sincerity and generosity, while the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) provides practical examples of how *mahr* should be offered with simplicity and justice. From Khadījah (RA) to Umm Ḥabībah (RA), each wife of the Prophet received *mahr* in a way that matched her context—sometimes large, sometimes small, sometimes symbolic—but always respectful. These examples teach us that *mahr* is not about money alone. It is about recognizing the woman's dignity and ensuring her financial and emotional security. Today, many people have moved away from the original purpose of *mahr*. Either they treat it as a useless formality or inflate it to an

unrealistic burden. Both approaches go against the wisdom of Islam. We must return to the balanced model of the Prophet (PBUH), where *mahr* is a meaningful agreement that strengthens marriage rather than complicating it. By promoting knowledge, honesty, and moderation, we can revive the true spirit of *mahr* in Muslim societies—making marriages not only valid in law but also blessed in purpose.

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