

## GENDER STUDIES IN THE QURAN: INTERPRETATIONS OF WOMEN'S ROLES AND RIGHTS

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### Abstract

In the context of the Quran, the term gender refers to the concept of separation of roles, characteristics, and responsibilities between men and women based on the interpretation of sacred verses. The Quran addresses the concept of gender not only as a biological difference, but also as a complex social and spiritual construct. It emphasises the equal spiritual dignity of men and women before God, while recognising differences in function in some aspects of social and family life. The understanding of gender in the Quran has been the subject of diverse interpretations throughout Islamic history, with contemporary interpretations tending to emphasise the principles of equality and justice, while still appreciating the distinctiveness of each sex within the framework of Islamic ethics and spirituality. The study in this research uses the literature study method. The results found that; Firstly, the Quran fundamentally affirms the equality of men and women in terms of spiritual and human values. Although some traditional interpretations tend to limit the role of women, contextual and linguistic analyses of Quranic verses show that the holy book supports women's active participation in various aspects of life, including social, economic and political. Secondly, the Quran grants women a variety of progressive rights for the time, including the right to education, employment, property ownership, and marital justice. However, the implementation of these rights is often hindered by interpretations influenced by patriarchal culture and specific socio-historical contexts.

**Keywords:** Gender, Quran, Women's Rights, Interpretation, Islam, Equality

### Introduction

The issue of gender and the role of women has been a complex debate involving various perspectives in society. Gender is a social construction that is different from biological sex, but often determines a person's rights and obligations unfairly. Gender discrimination has hindered women's participation in various aspects of life such as education, employment, and politics (Nawaz et al., 2021).

On the other hand, religious teachings are often a source of inspiration to redefine gender roles fairly. The Quran guarantees the dignity and human rights of every human being regardless of gender. Several Quranic verses call for equality and justice for men and women in various contexts of life. However, the translation and interpretation of these verses are still hotly debated among contemporary scholars (Sells, 2023).

Women have an invaluable contribution to the progress of humanity. When empowered, this half of the world's population can improve living standards through child education, family economic productivity, and participation in decision-making (Ng, 2022). Countries that promote equal gender participation enjoy great benefits in sustainable development. Therefore, gender equality issues need to be achieved through an inclusive and dialogical approach involving all stakeholders (Sonbol, 2021).

Women's rights are an integral part of human rights. The recognition and protection of women's rights is essential to creating a just and equal society. These include the right to live free

from discrimination and violence, the right to equal education and employment, the right to reproductive health, and the right to participate in public and political life. Ensuring women's rights is not only beneficial for women themselves, but also for their families, communities and society at large (Jahan, 2024). When women's rights are valued and protected, it creates the foundation for a more stable, prosperous and inclusive society. However, interpretations of these verses are often diverse and sometimes controversial, reflecting the complexity of understanding sacred texts in different socio-cultural contexts (Duderija, 2020).

Historically, the interpretation of the Quran has been dominated by male perspectives, which often results in interpretations that tend to be patriarchal. This has raised questions and criticisms from various circles, especially from Muslim feminist scholars and activists, who have raised the importance of reinterpreting Quranic verses with a more gender-sensitive approach (Jansen, 2021).

The times and significant changes in society have brought new challenges in understanding and applying the teachings of the Quran on the role and rights of women. On the one hand, there are groups that uphold traditional interpretations, while on the other hand, there is a movement to reinterpret Quranic verses in a modern context by considering the principle of gender equality (Pilkington, 2020).

This debate not only has theoretical implications, but also practical ones in the daily lives of Muslims. The interpretation of Quranic verses on women's roles and rights affects various aspects of life, ranging from family law, women's participation in community spaces, to state policies in Muslim countries (Bhutto & Ramzan, 2021).

The study of this sensitive issue requires a comprehensive approach and in-depth analysis of the interpretation of several Quranic verses on gender, especially the rights and roles of women. This study aims to investigate the various interpretations that exist, evaluate the factors of differences in interpretation, and consider their relevance amid the dynamics of modern times. The limitations of human understanding of divine words demand a multi-perspective search so that the deepest meanings can be properly revealed.

## **Research Methods**

This study uses a literature review, which is a research approach that uses written sources to collect and analyse information. (Ainiyah, 2021); (Pertiwi & Weganofa, 2015); (Waruwu, 2024).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Concept of Gender in Islam**

Gender discourse in Islam can be understood through concepts that refer to the roles, responsibilities, and rights given to men and women based on Islamic teachings and values. Islam recognises biological differences between men and women, but emphasises spiritual and moral equality before Allah SWT (Solomon et al., 2021). Islamic learning believes that men and women are equal in worship, education, and moral responsibility, although there are differences in some aspects of law and social roles that are supported by their nature and abilities. The concept of gender in Islam aims to create harmony and equality in society, while respecting the unique characteristics and potential of each gender (Glas & Alexander, 2020).

The concept of gender in Islam is based on the principles of justice and equality between men and women, which are derived from the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Islam recognises the biological differences between men and women, but asserts that these differences do not make

one gender superior to the other in spirituality and worth before Allah (Myrne, 2020). The Qur'an endorses that men and women are created from the same conscience and both have similar potential to achieve goodness and piety. Islam assigns rights and responsibilities to men and women in line with their respective traits and abilities, in order to create balance and harmony in individual, family, and community life (Roald, 2021).

Although Islam affirms spiritual equality, there are some differences in roles and responsibilities between men and women in the social and family context. For example, men are given the responsibility of being the leader of the family and the main breadwinner, while women have an important role in childcare and household management (Ali, 2021). However, Islam also encourages flexibility in this division of roles, giving women the freedom to contribute to public life, education and work as long as they do not violate the principles of sharia. It should be understood that the concept of gender in Islam aims to create a just and balanced society, where men and women are able to contribute according to their strengths and abilities, while respecting Islamic values and ethics.

### **History of Quranic Interpretation on Gender Issues**

The history of gender-related Quranic interpretations has undergone evolution and transformation throughout the course of Islam. In early times, the interpretation of the Quran tended to be more inclusive and provide ample space for women. This can be seen from the active role of women in all aspects of social and religious life during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (Mundzir, 2021). However, as time passed and the development of Islamic society, the interpretation of Quranic verses related to gender began to be influenced by the patriarchal culture that dominated various Islamic regions (Sabar et al., 2022).

In medieval times, interpretations of the Quran related to gender issues tended to be more conservative and limited the role of women in society. This was influenced by social, cultural and political factors that developed at that time. Many classical scholars interpreted Quranic verses regarding gender in a way that tended to place women in a subordinate position (Shah, 2020). For example, the interpretation of male leadership over women (qawwamah) in QS An-Nisa: 34 is often interpreted as male superiority over women in all aspects of life, even though the context of the verse is more specific to husband-wife relationships in the household (Iqbal et al., 2022).

Entering the modern and contemporary era, a reform movement emerged in the interpretation of the Quran related to gender issues. Progressive Muslim scholars and feminists began to propose new interpretations that were more gender-sensitive and in accordance with the current context. They use hermeneutics, contextualisation and linguistic analysis to reinterpret Quranic verses related to gender (Nurjanah & Nur, 2022). Figures such as Fatimah Mernissi, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas have made significant contributions in developing a more egalitarian and gender-just interpretation of the Quran. This contemporary interpretation seeks to restore the spirit of gender equality and justice that exists in the Quran, while still paying attention to the socio-historical context and the universal goals of Islamic sharia (maqashid al-syari'ah) (Dzuhayatin, 2020).

The development of Quranic interpretation related to gender issues continues to this day, with the emergence of various new approaches and methodologies. Contemporary Muslim scholars endeavour to strike a balance between traditional understandings and the needs of modern society. They use an interdisciplinary approach, involving social science, history, and linguistics in interpreting gender-related Quranic verses (Antasari, 2021).

One important aspect in the development of contemporary tafsir is the attempt to understand the historical context (the cause of the verse's revelation) and the moral purpose (maqasid) of Quranic verses. This approach allows commentators to distinguish between the universal teachings of the Quran and cultural practices that may have influenced previous interpretations (Boo, 2021). For example, in interpreting verses on polygamy, contemporary preachers tend to emphasise the historical context and moral purpose of the verse, which is more about protection and justice for women, rather than legitimising the practice of unconditional polygamy (Moghadam, 2020).

Technological and media developments have also influenced the way Quranic interpretations are disseminated and discussed. Digital platforms and social media allow for a wider exchange of ideas and dialogue on gender issues in Islam. This opens up opportunities for new perspectives and a more diverse understanding of gender roles in Muslim societies (Asl, 2022).

Thus, the history of Quranic interpretation on gender issues has undergone a significant evolution, from patriarchal interpretations in the classical period to more egalitarian approaches in the contemporary era. This development reflects social, cultural and intellectual changes in Muslim societies.

### **Theories of Quranic Interpretation**

Theories of Quranic interpretation have evolved throughout history. There are several main approaches: history-based interpretation, reason-based interpretation, and isyari interpretation. Each has a different way of understanding and explaining the meaning of the verse.

In modern times, new theories have emerged that integrate traditional understanding and contemporary approaches. One influence is Quranic hermeneutics, which adopts the principles of Western hermeneutics and applies them to the context of interpretation. It emphasises the importance of understanding historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts in interpreting scripture. Thematic is also popular for grouping verses by theme for comprehensive understanding (Stevens, 2020).

Other contemporary theories of interpretation include semiotic which studies signs and symbols, structuralist which analyses language and narrative, and contextual which emphasises the importance of understanding the historical and social context when the Quran was revealed and today. These developments reflect the efforts of Muslim scholars seeking new ways of understanding and applying the teachings of the Quran in modern contexts while maintaining the integrity and authority of the sacred text (Pearson, 2020).

Science and technology have also influenced new ways of interpreting the Quran. Quranic science, for example, tries to find correlations between verses and modern scientific discoveries, although it is controversial. Feminists are coming to terms with gender issues in traditional interpretations with the aim of promoting gender equality and justice in the understanding and practice of Islam. Pluralistic and inclusive are getting more attention in global and multicultural contexts to find universal messages that bridge religious and cultural differences and promote interfaith dialogue (Tett, 2020).

In conclusion, the theory of tafsir will continue to evolve according to the changing times and modern challenges. The diversity of approaches reflects the intellectual richness of the Islamic tradition and scholars' efforts to understand and apply the teachings of the Quran in all contexts. Despite the differences, the goal remains to better understand the message of the Quran and apply it to the lives of Muslims and society at large.

## **Interpretation of Quranic Verses on the Role of Women**

The interpretation of Quranic verses related to the role of women has long been a complex and often debated topic in Islamic studies. Traditional interpretations tend to reinforce the role of women particularly in the domestic and family context, based on verses such as An-Nisa: 34 which discusses male leadership in the household. Such understandings have long influenced understandings of the position and role of women in Muslim societies (Ramadan, 2022).

However, in recent decades, a new approach to understanding these verses has emerged. Muslim feminist scholars and progressive thinkers have offered alternative interpretations that emphasise gender equality and broader roles for women. They refer to verses such as Al-Hujurat: 13 which emphasise human equality before God, regardless of gender. This approach seeks to understand Quranic verses in their historical context and interpret them in accordance with the principles of justice and equality also contained in the Quran (Rohmah et al., 2022).

Contemporary interpretations also consider verses that portray women in important roles, such as the story of Ratna Balqis in Surah An-Naml, which shows women's leadership in government. Verses that tell the story of Mariam, the mother of Prophet Isa, are also often referenced to demonstrate the spirituality and nobility of women in Islam. This approach seeks to highlight positive examples of women's roles in the Quran and make them the basis for a more inclusive interpretation (Alsarhan et al., 2021).

Debates about the interpretation of verses related to women's roles continue, reflecting the dynamics in contemporary Islamic thought. While some groups still cling to traditional interpretations, others encourage a more contextualised and egalitarian understanding (Koburtay et al., 2020). The main challenge in this discussion is how to reconcile the textual understanding of the Quran with the ever-changing social reality, and how to realise the principles of justice and equality that are also an integral part of Islamic teachings (Islam & Mannering, 2021).

In the development of interpretations of Quranic verses related to the role of women, there is an attempt to connect traditional understandings with the demands of modern times. Many contemporary scholars have endeavoured to place the verses in the current socio-cultural context while still adhering to the basic principles of Islam. They argue that the Quran's universal message of justice and equality should be the foundation for understanding the role of women in contemporary Islamic societies (Basri et al., 2022).

One important aspect of contemporary tafsir is the emphasis on women's education and self-development. Verses that encourage the pursuit of knowledge, such as in Surah Al 'Alaq, are considered universal commands that apply to both men and women. This tafsir supports women's active participation in education and professional life, arguing that women's intellectual and social contributions are important for the advancement of the Muslim community as a whole (Abubakar et al., 2022).

Discussions on the role of women in public leadership have also come into focus in modern tafsir. Some scholars refer to historical examples of Muslim women who had significant roles in society, such as Aisha r.a. who became the source of many hadiths and Islamic knowledge. They argue that there is no explicit prohibition in the Quran for women to lead or actively participate in public affairs, provided that Islamic ethical and moral principles are upheld (Pajariato, 2022).

In conclusion, the interpretation of Quranic verses related to the role of women is constantly evolving and has become a dynamic subject of discussion in contemporary Islamic

thought. There is a wide spectrum of interpretations, ranging from the more conservative to the more progressive. However, there is a growing consensus that Islam is intrinsically supportive of gender equality and justice, and that the role of women in Muslim societies should be understood within the broader context of the principles of justice, wisdom and common good taught by the Quran. The challenge ahead is how to integrate this understanding into the social and legal practices of Muslim societies, while respecting the diversity of interpretations and traditions that exist within the Islamic world.

### **Interpretation of Quranic Verses on Women's Rights**

The interpretation of Quranic verses related to women's rights can be explained in the following four paragraphs:

Firstly, spiritual equality. The Quran affirms the spiritual equality between men and women. In Surah Al-Ahzab verse 35, Allah SWT mentions various noble qualities that apply to both sexes, indicating that in faith and good deeds, there is no difference between men and women. This verse is often used as a basis to assert that women have equal rights and obligations in terms of worship and spiritual development (El-Solh & Mabro, 2020).

Second, the right to education. Although there are no verses that explicitly mention the right to education for women, many scholars interpret verses that encourage the pursuit of knowledge as a general command. For example, the first verse revealed in Surah Al-'Alaq which reads "Read!" is considered to apply to all Muslims, both men and women. This interpretation is the basis for emphasising women's right to equal education (Duderija, 2020).

Third, economic rights. The Quran recognises women's economic rights in several verses. Surah An-Nisa verse 32 states that both men and women will get a share of what they have worked for. This verse is often interpreted as recognising women's right to work and own their own property. In addition, the verses on inheritance, although often debated, also show recognition of women's right to own and manage property (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021).

Fourth, rights in marriage. The Quran discusses in detail the rights of women in marriage. Surah An-Nisa verse 4 affirms a woman's right to receive a dowry, while verse 19 of the same surah commands the husband to treat his wife well. Modern interpretations of these verses emphasise the concept of equality and partnership in marriage, rejecting practices that harm women such as forced marriage or domestic oppression (Prihatini, 2020).

### **Rights in Marriage and Divorce**

**Rights and Obligations of Marriage and Divorce in Islam** There are three important aspects that need to be elaborated on regarding the rights and obligations in marriage and divorce according to Islamic teachings:

Firstly, the right to choose a life partner. The Prophet Muhammad said that a woman should not be married without her consent. This shows that women have the right to determine whether to accept or reject a proposal. In addition, women also have the right to determine the amount of dowry as a guarantee of future life. These rights maintain that women have a voice in deciding important things in their lives (Ali, 2021).

Second, rights and obligations in the household. Islam gives husbands the mandate to provide maintenance, protection, and good treatment to their wives. The Quran reminds husbands to be gentle to their wives. Women also have the right to maintain their identity and manage their

personal property. This can be interpreted as the right to work and pursue a career as long as it does not neglect household responsibilities (Robinson, 2020).

Third, the right to divorce. Although it is enforced, Islam recognises that divorce is unavoidable under certain conditions. In this case, women have the right to ask for divorce if there are reasonable grounds such as abusive treatment or neglect of the husband. During the iddah period, women are entitled to maintenance and shelter. If they have children, women are usually given custody of their young children. This is Islam's attempt to protect the emotional and economic interests of women after divorce (Azzahra et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

The Quran, the holy book of Muslims, provides a solid foundation for gender equality and respect for women's rights. Although some traditional interpretations tend to position women in a more limited role, modern studies of the Quran indicate that the scripture does in fact promote fundamental equality between men and women. The Quran affirms that men and women are created from the same soul and have equal spiritual potential. More inclusive and contextualised interpretations of Quranic verses have opened up new understandings around women's roles and rights in Islam.

In terms of roles, the Quran does not limit women to the domestic sphere. Instead, the holy book recognises and values women's contributions in various aspects of life, including social, economic and political. Examples of women who played important roles in Islamic history, such as Khadijah, Aisha and Maryam, indicate that women have the capacity to be leaders, scientists and spiritual figures. The Quran encourages both men and women to seek knowledge and contribute positively to society, confirming that women's roles are not limited to the household.

Regarding women's rights, the Quran provides progressive protections and guarantees for its time. These include the right to own and manage property, the right to education, the right to work and fair compensation, and rights in marriage and divorce. The Quran also emphasises the importance of good treatment of women and condemns practices that disadvantage women that were common in pre-Islamic times. Modern interpretations of these verses emphasise the importance of understanding the historical and social context, and applying the principles of justice and equality in the contemporary context. Thus, gender studies in the Quran are not only relevant for understanding the position of women in Islam, but also provide a basis for fighting for women's rights in modern Muslim societies.

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