Rethinking Gender Justice in the Quran: A Critical Exploration of Muslim Feminist Perspectives

Meninjau Ulang Keadilan Gender dalam Al-Qur'an: Eksplorasi Kritis terhadap Perspektif Muslim Feminis

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Abstract

Discussions on men and women in Islam involve three major schools of thought: classical Muslim scholars, secular feminists, and Muslim feminists. While all aim to uphold women's dignity, they diverge in their interpretations. Classical Muslim scholars emphasize justice but do not necessarily advocate absolute equality between men and women, whereas secular and Muslim feminists argue for full equality in rights and responsibilities as a form of just treatment. In particular, Muslim feminists engage in Quranic reinterpretation to uncover gender justice rooted in equality. This paper examines how Muslim feminists construct their arguments in Quranic reinterpretation, critiques the logic underlying their exegetical approach, and explores a Quranic perspective on gender justice that is both "meaningful" and contextually relevant to contemporary society. To achieve this, the study employs a critical-appreciative approach, integrating critical discourse analysis and maqasidic interpretation to analyze these three aspects. The findings highlight three key points: first, the efforts of Muslim feminists in advocating for women's fundamental rights deserve recognition; second, their exegetical reasoning requires scrutiny, as it tends to shift from social analysis to ideological assertion; and third, the Quran presents a concept of gender justice that is dynamic and adaptable to diverse contemporary contexts. Justice in Islam does not always equate to equality; rather, it can manifest as proportional rights and responsibilities that maintain social balance and harmony. Thus, gender justice can be achieved through differentiation, provided it upholds fairness within the given context. This study bridges feminist and traditional Islamic scholarship by critically assessing Muslim feminist exegesis and proposing a contextualized framework for Quranic gender justice.

Keywords: *Gender Justice, Quranic Interpretation, Muslim Feminism, Equality, Differentiation.*

Abstrak

Pembahasan mengenai laki-laki dan perempuan dalam Islam melibatkan tiga aliran pemikiran utama: ulama Muslim klasik, feminis sekuler, dan feminis Muslim. Meskipun ketiganya bertujuan untuk menjaga martabat perempuan, mereka berbeda dalam penafsiran mereka. Ulama Muslim klasik menekankan keadilan tetapi tidak selalu menganjurkan kesetaraan mutlak antara laki-laki dan perempuan. Sementara itu, feminis sekuler dan feminis Muslim berpendapat bahwa kesetaraan penuh dalam hak dan tanggung jawab merupakan bentuk perlakuan yang adil. Secara khusus, feminis Muslim terlibat dalam penafsiran ulang Al-Qur'an untuk mengungkap konsep keadilan gender yang berakar pada prinsip kesetaraan.

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana feminis Muslim membangun argumen mereka dalam penafsiran ulang Al-Qur'an, mengkritisi logika di balik pendekatan penafsiran tersebut, serta mengeksplorasi perspektif Al-Qur'an tentang keadilan gender yang "bermakna" dan relevan secara kontekstual dengan masyarakat kontemporer. Pendekatan kritis-apresiatif diterapkan dalam penelitian ini, dengan mengintegrasikan analisis wacana kritis dan penafsiran maqashidi untuk menganalisis ketiga aspek tersebut. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan tiga temuan utama: pertama, upaya feminis Muslim dalam memperjuangkan hak-hak dasar perempuan patut diapresiasi; kedua, logika penafsiran mereka perlu dikritisi karena cenderung bergeser dari analisis sosial menuju penegasan ideologis; dan ketiga, Al-Qur'an menyajikan konsep keadilan gender yang dinamis dan dapat beradaptasi dengan konteks kontemporer. Dalam Islam, keadilan tidak selalu berarti kesetaraan; melainkan dapat terwujud melalui hak dan kewajiban yang proporsional untuk menjaga keseimbangan dan harmoni sosial. Dengan demikian, keadilan gender dapat dicapai melalui pembedaan, asalkan tetap menjunjung prinsip keadilan dalam konteks yang relevan. Penelitian ini menjembatani pemikiran feminis dan tradisi keilmuan Islam klasik dengan mengevaluasi secara kritis penafsiran feminis Muslim serta menawarkan kerangka kerja kontekstual untuk memahami keadilan gender dalam Al-Qur'an.

Kata kunci: *keadilan gender, penafsiran Al-Qur'an, feminisme Muslim, kesetaraan, pembedaan.*

Introduction

Discussions on men and women, and their relations in the Islamic world, which commenced with the advent of Prophet Muhammad[1] and continued through classical Muslim thinkers, including Sufis,[2] exegetes, and jurists,[3] have been met with both appreciative and critical responses. Over such an extended period, Islamic thought on this topic has been considered to honor women, garnering appreciation and serving as a guide for Muslims in both domestic and public spheres. However, as time has progressed, transitioning from agrarian to industrial and digital societies that offer equal opportunities irrespective of gender, modern thinkers have emerged, critiquing and challenging the classical Islamic perspective, accusing it of demeaning and unjust treatment of women, namely secular feminist and Muslim feminist.[4] What distinguishes them are analytical tools and sources used. Besides using gender analysis as so secular feminist, Muslim feminist also refers to the Qur'an and Hadith on his or her quests. The latter is a Muslim who actively engages with the gender

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1   Abdul Halim Muhammad Abu Syuqqah, *Tahrir Mar'ah fi Ashri al-Risalah: Risalah an al-Mar'ati Jami'atan li Nushus al-Qur'an wa Shahih al-Bukhari wa Muslim,* 2nd edition (Cairo: Dar al-Qalam, 2010).

2   Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam*: *Kitab Rujukan tentang Relasi Gender dalam Kosmologi dan Teologi Islam*, trans. by Rahmani Astuti, and M.S. Nasrullah, 6th ed. (Bandung: Mizan, 1998).

3   Hassan Hanafi, *Hishar al-Zaman: al-Madi w al-Mustaqbal (Ulum)* (Cairo: Markaz al-Kitab li al-Nasyr, 2006), 261–288.

4   Etin Anwar, *Feminisme Islam: Genealogi, Tantangan, dan Prospek di Indonesia*, trans. by Nina Nurmila (Bandung: Mizan, 2021)*, 1– 42.

justicemovement, or so-called Islamic feminism or Muslim feminism.[5]

The critics and challengers include not only Western thinkers (secular feminists), which is understandable given their outsider status to Islamic tradition, but also Muslim feminists, whose critique is particularly noteworthy given their insider status within the Islamic community. Muslim feminists, differing from classical Muslim thinkers, perceive gender injustices against women, attributed to patriarchal culture as well as patriarchal biases in Quranic interpretation. They advocate for gender justice for women by proposing reinterpretations of Quranic verses discussing men, women, and their relationships.

The efforts of Muslim feminists have yielded positive results, deserving of recognition, yet have also created a dilemmatic situation that warrants criticism. On the positive side, women are increasingly assuming strategic roles in both domestic and public realms, although this success is not necessarily a direct outcome of their movement but possibly due to changing socio-economic conditions.[6] The dilemma lies in the shift in orientation of the feminist movement, which initially began as a social movement[7] but has transitioned into an ideological one. This shift is evidenced by the emergence of a new term in Islamic thought, "Islamic feminism."[8] The addition of "-ism" signifies the transformation of this social movement and thought into an ideological feminist movement.

Epistemologically, this shift in orientation carries negative implications.[9] As

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5   Two terms need to be clearly clarified, namely Islamic feminism and Muslim feminism. Per Cooke, as quoted by Qibtiyah, Islamic feminism relates to the Islamic tradition which has already been the feminism consideration, while Muslim feminism refers to a figures of feminist who is Muslim by religion, regardless whether he or she takes Islamic teaching into account for his or her feminism quests. Alimatul Qibtiyah, *Feminisme Muslim di Indonesia*, 3rd ed. (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2019), 17-18; Etin Anwar defines "Islamic feminism" as social and intellectual movement organized by Muslim women to proselytize Islamic teaching as reference in advocating gender justice and eliminating repressions. Meanwhile, "Muslim feminist" term is used to identify actions conducted by a Muslim engaged in feminism movement as quests in advocating women rights are not necessarily in line with Islamic feminism. Etin Anwar, *Feminisme Islam…*, 20.

6   Asghar Ali Engineer, *Pembebasan Perempuan*, trans. by Agus Nuryatno, 2nd ed. (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2007), 1–6.

7   In its early development, gender analysis was a part of broader social theories rooted on two sociological theories: functional and conflict. The functionalist theory considers society as a system, of whose part does not function well, then emerges disharmony. To avoid disharmony, or to gain harmony, the system should be well maintained. This sociological theory has played as mainstream school which, in turn, has developed liberal feminism. On the other hand, as an alternative school, the conflict theory denies societal harmony as humanity's purpose since every individuals essentially have their own interests. From this theory, then emerged three feminism school, namely radicalist, Marxist, and socialist. Mansour Fakih, *Analisis Gender dan Transformasi Sosial*, 8th ed. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2004); Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender: Perspektif al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2000), 33–90.

8   Etin Anwar, *Feminisme Islam: Genealogi, Tantangan, dan Prospek di Indonesia*, trans. by Nina Nurmila (Bandung: Mizan, 2021).

9   Thinking ideologically does not necessarily mean thinking negatively, as everyone must be

a component of social movement and thought, gender analysis is positive because it can "unveil" the occurrence of negative stereotyping of women's identities, unfair treatment, marginalization, and violence against women, both culturally and religiously, in domestic and public spaces.[10] Conversely, as an ideology, gender analysis functions as a closed doctrine that ultimately engenders claims of truth while rejecting and judging differing views. Opinions placing men above women in certain cases are accused of being anti-gender. Since not only culture is blamed but also classical Islamic thought, particularly exegesis and jurisprudence accused of engendering patriarchal Islam (Islamic patriarchism),[11] these thinkers are positioned as ultimately responsible for gender discrimination against women through what is termed as "hatred interpretation."[12]

Since what the Muslim feminists have done in advocating gender justice for women are ideological, hence their Quranic interpretations are also ideological, though claimed as epistemological. On the other hand, they argue that gender justice is necessarily gender equality. Consequently, on Quranic verses that impress inequality between men and women, they reinterpret them to show equality.

Therefore, we would like to critically appreciate the thoughts of Muslim feminists through three aspects: *First*, describe how Muslim feminists construct their arguments in reinterpreting Quranic verses about men, women, and their relationships. *Second*, to critique the rationale of Muslim feminist Quranic interpretation regarding men, women, and their relationships. *Third*, to explore the Quran's messages of Gender Justice about men, women, and their relationships that are meaningful or suitable for contemporary and everyday Indonesian society.

There are already numerous writings on men, women, and their relations in the Islamic perspective (the Quran) with various focus areas. Since this paper focuses on the appreciation-critique of the interpretative rationale of Muslim feminists on the Quran, only writings related to the problem of interpreting the Quran are cited here, with the aim of understanding the position of this paper.

Among these works is Hidayatullah who has published her work on feminist Muslim scholars, among others are Riffat Hassan, Azizah al-Hibri, Amina Wadud,

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thinking ideologicaly – in its common sense. What negatives are its implications, that make thoughts or scriptures merely as justifying references for certain ideologies, which tend to be close-minded and perform self truth claim. Aksin Wijaya, *Menafsir Kalam Tuhan: Kritik Ideologis Interpretasi al-Qur'an Ibnu Rusyd* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2021), 60.

10   Asghar Ali Engineer, *Pembebasan Perempuan...*, 37–63.

11   Syafiq Hasyim, *Bebas Dari Patriarkhisme Islam,* (Depok: Kata Kita, 2010).

12   Fatima Mernisi, *Menengok Kontroversi Peran Wanita dalam Politik*, trans. by M. Masyhur Abadi (Surabaya: Dunia Ilmu, 1997); Zaitunah Subhan, *Tafsir Kebencian: Studi Bias Gender dalam Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1999).

Asma Barlas, Sadiyya Shaikh, and Kecia Ali. The central argument of these scholars on the Qur'anic messages are ethos of justice, kindness, and equality, nevertheless, according to Hidayatullah, they were methodologically inconsistent. For instance are the use of historical contextualization and the consideration of hadith that sometimes arbitrary and based on personal interest of them.[13]

Another similar study had also been conducted earlier by Adam on "a feminist Muslim scholar, Asma Barlas, on her Qur'anic reinterpretation within Islamic feminism discourse". According to Barlas, the traditional interpreters had manipulated Qur'an interpretation for the sake of their benefits in repressing women and to build their male-centered authority. Barlas considers how classical interpretation methodology was patriarchal, misogynic, and anti-women, so the recontextualization of the Qur'an by adopting a gender-oriented interpretation methodology is needed.[14]

Shahana Rasool and Muhammed Suleman authored "Muslim Women Overcoming Marital Violence: Breaking Through 'Structural and Cultural Prisons' Created by Religious Leaders".[15] The work discusses how South African Muslim women combat norms produced by religious scholars that silence and restrict them from breaking free from marital violence.

Bakar's work studies Amina Wadud's concept of hermeneutics on gender equality. In particular, the concept of hermeneutics based on Wadud's interpretation of certain keywords, namely nafs, min, and azwaj, and key concepts, namely qiwamah, angel, and nusyuz in the Qur'an. According to Wadud, those words have been partially interpreted by most mufassir, so gender-bias interpretations emerge. The study also found that Wadud conducted her hermeneutical endeavor in two steps: scrutinizing how the Quran talks on certain related issues and producing the general notion of Qur'anic responses toward those issues.[16]

Hamka Hasan, Asep S. Jahar, Nasaruddin Umar, and Irwan Abdullah wrote "Polygamy: Uncovering the Effect of Patriarchal Ideology on Gender-Biased Interpretation", which examines the construction of patriarchal interpretation, its

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13 Aysha A. Hidayatullah, "Hidayatullah, Feminist Edgest of the Qur'an", In 2014, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199359561.001.0001. https://academic.oup.com/book/11525

14 I. I. Adam, Qur'anic interpretation politicized: Asma barlas' text rereading. *Al-Shajarah*, *21*(1) (2016): 73–89. https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85028591684&partnerID=40&md5=009d6333eec615c8d56561d009dd33b0

15 Shahana Rasool and Muhammed Suleman. "Muslim women overcoming marital violence: breaking through 'structural and cultural prisons' created by religious leaders", *Agenda*, 30, no. 3 (2017): 39–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2016.1275199.

16 A. Bakar. Women on the Text According to Amina Wadud Muhsin in Qur'an and Women. *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum Dan Pranata Sosial*, *13*(1), 2018):167–186. https://doi.org/10.19105/al-lhkam.v13i1.1467

factors, and implications in gender-biased Quranic interpretation, using qualitative methods and content analysis.[17] Adis Duderija authored "Contemporary Muslim Male Reformist Thought and Gender Equality Affirmative Interpretations of Islam", which investigates the arguments of three prominent contemporary Muslim male reformist scholars, both Shīʿī and Sunnī — Nasr Abu Zayd, Mohsen Kadivar, and Khaled Abou El Fadl — in developing gender equality affirmative interpretations of Islam.[18]

Mohammad Ismath Ramzy and Simin Ghavifekr wrote "Women Quazi in a Minority Context: An Overview of Sri Lankan Experience".[19] The paper critically examines the classical scholars' views on the qualifications of a judge according to the Quran and Hadith.

Tedi Supriyadi, Julia, and Endis Firdaus wrote "The Problem of Gender Equality: A Reconstruction of Islamic Doctrine", which recontextualizes Islamic concepts, reinterprets the Quran and Hadith to provide opportunities for women regarding the concept of equality, and reconstructs Islamic doctrine on women's leadership based on perspectives from the Quran, Hadith, jurisprudence, Sufism, politics, and history.[20]

While several of the aforementioned writings focus on advocating for women by highlighting the influence of patriarchal culture in interpreting the Quran, and then reinterpreting Quranic verses about men, women, and their relationships, this paper serves as a critical appreciation of the thoughts of Muslim feminists. It is appreciative because they are part of the Muslim intellectual community, and critical because their thinking has begun to shift in orientation, from being a form of social thought and analysis to adopting an ideological stance. Importantly, the critique is not directed at their struggle and discourse in defending women's rights, but rather at their increasingly ideological framework, especially in their interpretations of the Quran. This includes their disregard for the influence of gender ideology that has affected them, their methods in reinterpreting the Quran, and the concept of gender justice they advocate.

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17 Hamka Hasan, Asep S. Jahar, Nasaruddin Umar, and Irwan Abdullah, "Polygamy: Uncovering the effect of patriarchal ideology on gender-biased interpretation", *Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022): a7970. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7970.

18 Adis Duderija, "Contemporary Muslim Male Reformist Thought and Gender Equality Affirmative Interpretations of Islam", *Feminist Theology* 28, no. 2 (2020): 161–181. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735019886076.

19 Ismath Ramzy, Mohammad, and Simin Ghavifekr. "Women *Quazi* in a Minority Context: An Overview of Sri Lankan Experience" *Societies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 13. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc9010013.

20 Tedi Supriyadi, Julia, Endis Firdaus. "The Problems of Gender Equality: A Reconstruction of Islamic Doctrine", *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 10, no. 2 (2019): 91–110.

This paper employs a method of critical appreciation[21] combined with the utilization of critical discourse analysis theory[22] and maqasidic interpretation.[23] The critical appreciation method is used to position Muslim feminists as both allies in opinion-sharing and adversaries in intellectual exchange, meriting both appreciation and critique. Critical discourse analysis is applied to critically analyze the discourse politics employed by Muslim feminists in their Quranic interpretation reasoning. Meanwhile, maqasidic interpretation is utilized to negotiate between reinterpreting or selecting existing Quranic messages that align (are meaningful) with our contemporary and everyday conditions.

To strengthen this paper, primary sources include works by Middle Eastern Muslim feminists[24] and Indonesian Muslim feminists.[25] Secondary sources comprise

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21 The term critical-appreciation is originally coined by Faisal Ismail. There are two terms that he uses, namely the appreciative-criticism and the critical-appreciative thinking methods. *Firstly*, the appreciative-criticism thinking method, which is a thinking method with the principle that "opponents" in opinion are "friends" in exchanging ideas. With such attitude, we will have an appreciative critical view. Thus, when criticizing the opinions of "opponents", our criticism is not to destroy them, but to exchange ideas instead. Something not good from the "opponent" does not need to be taken, while something good from them might be taken. Second, the critical-appreciative thinking method, which is a method of thinking that has the principle that "friends" in opinion are "opponents" in exchanging ideas. With such attitude, we will have an appreciative view that is full of criticism in seeing or studying certain issues. We follow the opinion of "friends" discursively and critically. The good opinions are followed, while the not-good ones are criticized and should not be followed. This is the principle of the "critical-appreciative" thinking method. Faisal Ismail, *Dinamika Kerukunan Antarumat Beragama* (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2014), 29; Faisal Ismail, *Pijar-Pijar Islam: Pergumulan Kultur dan Struktur* (Yogyakarta: LESFI, 2004), 32; further study on critical appreciation and appreciative criticism method could be found in Aksin Wijaya, *Visi Pluralis-Humanis Islam Faisal Ismail* (Yogyakarta: Dialektika, 2016), 7–17. Through such method, the Muslim feminists' thoughts will initially be appreciated, then be criticized using the logics of critical discourse analysis.

22 The critical discourse analysis stands on aspects of differentiation, domination, marginalization, and justification. Aksin Wijaya, *Menafsir Kalam Tuhan...*, 55–61; such theory will be used to analyse the efforts of Muslim feminists to highlight dichotomic Quranic verses on the men and women relation: equal and un-equal, then reinterpret certain verses showing inequality to become equal.

23 Maqasidic interpretation is an exegesis theory that tries to uncover three dimensions of Quranic meaning, namely textual meaning, ideal-moral meaning, and spirit-contextual meaning. The latest might also be described as productive or meaningful meaning which could align with different spatial contexts based on the conditions of its readers and societies. The term "align" here shows the axiologic dimension of Quranic messages. Aksin Wijaya, *Fenomena Berislam: Genealogi dan Orientasi Berislam Menurut al-Qur'an*, (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2022), 56–57.

24 Qasim Amin, *al-A'mal al-Kamilah*, 3rd edition (Cairo: Dar al-Syuruq, 2006); Asma Barlas, *Cara al-Qur'an Membebaskan Perempuan*, trans. by R. Cecep Lukman Yasin (Jakarta: Serambi, 2003); Fatima Mernisi, *Menengok Kontroversi Peran Wanita dalam Politik*, trans. by M. Masyhur Abadi (Surabaya: Dunia Ilmu, 1997); Amina Wadud, *Qur'an Menurut Perempuan: Meluruskan Bias Gender dalam Tradisi Tafsir*, trans. by Abdullah Ali (Jakarta: Serambi Ilmu Semesta, 2001); Asghar Ali Engineer, *Pembebasan Perempuan*, trans. by Agus Nuryatno, 2nd ed. (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2007).

25 Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender: Perspektif al-Qur'an,* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2001); Zaitunah Subhan, *Tafsir Kebencian: Studi Bias Gender dalam Tafsir al-Qur'an,* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1999); Etin Anwar, *Feminisme Islam: Genealogi, Tantangan, dan Prospek di Indonesia*, trans. by Nina Nurmila (Bandung: Mizan, 2021); Syafiq Hasyim, *Bebas dari Patriarkhisme Islam,* (Depok: Kata Kita, 2010).

writings by Muslim thinkers and observers of Muslim feminist thought on the aforementioned topics.[26] A singular approach is adopted for data collection for this paper, namely, literature search through both internet and library resources.

The Logic of Muslim Feminist Quranic Interpretation

This section argumentation takes base on logical framework of Jabiri who distinguishes logical thinking into two categories, namely thinking as a method (logic) and as a discourse (result). [27] In line with that framework, this section would focus on the logic of Muslim Feminists in interpreting the Quran and their concepts on gender justice in Islamic perspectives.

First, what is described as the logic of Muslim feminist in interpreting the Quran on this paper is the thinking method (logic) of Muslim feminist regarding the issues on men and women and their relationships in Islamic perspectives. To discuss such issues, the Muslim feminists typically observe "from context to text", from cultural context where men and women live, to Quranic text and/or the Prophet's saying (hadith), the ultimate sources of Islamic teaching. By doing so, the Muslim feminists use both gender analysis to learn the relationship of men and women in cultural context, and Quranic interpretation, in particular Maqasidic interpretation and hermeneutics, to understand the text's aim.

In advocating for and defending women's basic rights, Muslim feminists start from the assumption that negative stereotypes and gender discrimination against women have occurred, relating both to the essence (identity) of women and their existence in both domestic and public spaces. Essentially, women are perceived as being created from a man's rib, inherently sinful, lacking in intelligence, deficient in religious understanding, overly emotional, among other views. These negative perspectives, influenced by patriarchal culture and patriarchal biases in classical

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26 Charles Kurzman (ed.), *al-Islam al-Librali: Kitabun Marji'iyyun*, trans. by Mahmud al-Maraghi and Muhammad Darraj (Lebanon-Beirut: al-Muassasah al-Arabiyah li al-Fikr wa al-Ibda', 2017), 221–318; See also a collection of works by researchers from the Middle East on the thoughts of Muslim feminists: Bassam al-Jamal (ed.) *Muhamawalatu Tajdid al-Fikr al-Islami, al-Juz al-Thani, Majmu'ah min al-Bakhisin,* (Rabat Aqdal, Marocco: Mu'assasah al-Mukminun bila Hududin, 2016), 101–175.

27 Distinction of method and discourse is based on Jabiri's analysis that distinguishes logical thinkin into two categories, namely thinking as a content (discourse) and thinking as a tool (method). The first is about opinions and thoughts derived from thinking as a tool (method), such as moralities, doctrines, school thoughts, and so on, Meanwhile, the latter is to produce thoughts, either produced within internal ideological frameworks or internal knowledge frameworks. Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, *Takwin al-Aql al-'Arabi,* 4th edition (Beyrut: Al-Markaz Al-Thaqafi al-Arabi Li-Al-Taba'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1991), 11-12; Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, *Ishkaliyât al-Fikr al-'Arabi al-Muâshir*, (Beyrut: Markaz Dirâsah al-Wahdah al-Arabiyah, 1989) 51-52; Clifford Geertz, *Pengetahuan Lokal*, trans. by Vivi Mubaikoh, (Yogyakarta: Rumah Penerbitan, 2003), 221.

Islamic thought (exegesis and jurisprudence), deny women equal opportunities for self-actualization. Consequently, women are existentially discriminated against and marginalized, both domestically and publicly. Such treatment is deemed as unjust towards women.

Muslim feminists endeavor to liberate women[28] from these shackles through two main actions. *Firstly*, they seek to raise awareness and empower women through the establishment of non-governmental organizations such as the female youth (Fatayat) and women's groups (Muslimat) within Nahdlatul Ulama, centers of gender/women's studies in universities,[29] congress of women ulama (Islamic scholars),[30] and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment by the Government. *Secondly*, they reinterpret Quranic verses that discuss two aspects related to men and women: (a) the essence of women, such as the creation of women from Adam's rib,[31] the notion that all women are inherently sinful,[32] women being less intelligent[33] and less religious,[34] the prostration of women to their husbands,[35] the idea of consulting women but disregarding their opinions,[36] the belief that only men are granted virgin mates in paradise,[37] prohibitions on women seeking knowledge,[38] women as sources of misfortune, women as the majority inhabitants of hell, the diminished value of a female child in rituals like 'aqiqah', restrictions on menstruating women entering mosques, the necessity of female circumcision, and so on; (b) the existence of women, both in the domestic sphere, such as rights in marriage and divorce,[39] breastfeeding,[40]

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28 Qasim Amin, "*Tahrir al-Mar'ah*" in *al-A'mal al-Kamilah* (The Complete Works), 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Syuruq, 2006); Abdul Halim Muhammad Abu Syuqqah, *Tahrir Mar'ah fi Ashri al-Risalah: Risalah an al-Mar'ati Jami'atan li Nushus al-Qur'an wa Shahih al-Bukhari wa Muslim*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Qalam, 2010); and Syafiq Hasyim, *Bebas dari Patriarkhisme Islam* (Depok: Kata Kita, 2010).

29 Alimatul Qibtiyah, *Feminisme Muslim di Indonesia*.., 56–76.

30 Nor Ismah. "Women's Fatwa-Making in Indonesia: Gender, Authority, and Everyday Legal Practice", International Journal of Islam in Asia 4, 1-2 (2024): 75-97, doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/25899996-20241073

31 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu: al-Mafahim wa al-Huquq, Qira'ah Jadidah li qadhaya al-Mar'ati fi al-Khithab al-Dini*, (Beirut-Lebanon: al-Intishar al-Arabi, 2009), 31–39.

32 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu*..., 40–42.

33 Ibid., 43–52.

34 Zaitunah Subhan, *Tafsir Kebencian...*, 55–64.

35 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu*..., 53–57.

36 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu*..., 58–66.

37 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu*..., 66–68.

38 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu*..., 69–76.

39 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu*..., 289–308; Asghar Ali Engineer, *Hak-hak Perempuan dalam Islam*, trans. by Farid Wajidi and Cici Farkha Assegaf, 2nd ed. (Yogyakarta: LSPPA, 2000), 149–181; 185–218.

40 Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu*..., 309–333.

inheritance;[41] and in the public sphere, like the rights of women to leave the house,[42] the use of hijab,[43] and holding public positions, such as becoming a judge or head of state.[44]

Secondly, gender justice. By using contextual interpretation approach, namely hermeneutics[45] and maqasidic interpretation,[46] the Muslim feminists were able to uncover and believe that the Quran, as a fundamental source of Islam, aims to establish justice among humans.[47] However, since the Quran does not provide a definitive definition of justice,[48] Muslim feminists equate justice with equality, thereby unveiling the concept of gender equality according to the Quran in their pursuit of gender justice.

They then catalog Quranic verses that demonstrate equality between men and women, such as the human nature of making mistakes, receiving religious commands, the accounting of human deeds by God, and the recompense for these deeds in the afterlife. On the other hand, they reinterpret verses that seem to indicate inequality between men and women concerning origins of creation, inheritance, bearing witness, holding public office, etc. With this interpretative logic, they assert that the Quran exists to establish justice through equality, even equality in all aspects.[49] Without equality, justice between men and women cannot be upheld.[50]

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41   Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu...*, 253–288.

42   Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu...*, 99–114.

43   Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu...*, 141–150; Muhammad Said al-Asymawi, *Haqiqatu al-Hijab wa Hujiyyatu al-Hadis,* (Cairo: al-Kitab al-Zahabi, 2002); Murtadha Muthahhari, *Wanita & Hijab*, trans. by Nashib Mustafa (Jakarta: Lentera Basritama, 2000).

44   Ahmad al-Qabbanji, *Al-Mar'atu...*, 77–98; Etin Anwar, *Jati Diri Perempuan dalam Islam,* (Bandung: Mizan, 2017); and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Perempuan (Bukan) Sumber Fitnah!: Mengkaji Ulang Hadis dengan Metode Mubadalah,* (Bandung: Afkaruna, 2021).

45   Amina Wadud, *Qur'an Menurut Perempuan...*, 35–39; Asma Barlas, *Cara al-Qur'an Membebaskan Perempuan*, trans. by. R. Cecep Lukman Yasin (Jakarta: Serambi, 2003), 83-134; Syafiq Hasyim, *Bebas Dari Patriarkhisme Islam...*, 58–61.

46   Zainab Thaha al-Ulwani, *al-Usratu fi Maqashid al-Syari'ah: Qira'ah fi Qadlaya al-Zawaj wa al-Thalaq fi Amerika* (USA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012); Syafiq Hasyim, *Bebas dari Patriarkhisme Islam…*, 53–58; Abdul Mustaqim, *al-Tafsir al-Maqasidi: al-Qadlaya al-Mu'ashirah fi Dawi al-Qur'an wa al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyah* (Yogyakarta: Idea Press, 2020), 64–70.

47   Sulthan bin Abdurrahman al-Amiri, *Qadhaya al-Hurriyah: Bahtsun fi Mafhumi al-Hurriyah fi al-Islam wa Falsafatuha wa Ab'atuha wa Hududuha,* 3rd ed. (Cairo: Markas al-Arabi li al-Dirasah al-Insaniyah, 2013), 79.

48   Majid Khadduri, *Teologi Keadilan Perspektif Islam*, trans. by H. Mochtar Zoerni and Joko S. Kahhar (Surabaya: Risalah Gusti, 1999).

49   Etin Anwar, *Feminisme Islam…,* 18.

50   Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender: Perspektif al-Qur'an,* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2001); Asghar Ali Engineer, *Hak-hak Perempuan dalam Islam…*, 63–90.

Critique against the Logic of Muslim Feminist Quranic Interpretation

The logic of Quranic interpretation and the concept of gender justice as championed by Muslim feminists are also subject to critique.

Firstly, the logic of Quranic interpretation. Both textual and contextual interpretations are equally valid in interpreting the Quran and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad. For example, when Prophet Muhammad told his companions on a return journey from battle, "Let none of you pray Asr except at Bani Quraidah," two opinions emerged among the companions. Some understood it as an instruction to hasten their journey to reach Bani Quraidah in time for Asr prayer, while others took it literally, believing they should perform Asr prayer at Bani Quraidah, even if the time had elapsed. Each group acted according to their understanding of Prophet Muhammad's statement. When both views were presented to him, he appreciated both.[51]

The first opinion represents thinkers who interpret the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad contextually, the second, those who interpret it textually. Since Prophet Muhammad appreciated both, it can be said that both approaches are valid in interpreting Islamic scriptures, both the Quran and Hadith. Therefore, it is unethical to blame classical Muslim thinkers who use textual interpretation as the root cause of patriarchal bias in Quranic interpretation, leading to gender discrimination against women.

On the other hand, Muslim feminists are not entirely fair in reinterpreting Quranic verses discussing men, women, and their relations. While the Quran essentially presents two categories of verses, equality and difference,[52] ideally balanced in discourse and methodology, Muslim feminists are more inclined to highlight verses demonstrating gender equality, while downplaying or even ignoring those that suggest inequality. Even when presenting verses indicating inequality, they persist in reinterpreting these verses using contextual interpretation, hermeneutics, and maqasidic interpretation. Such an approach can be assumed as a form of justification for the equality between men and women that constitutes their ideological struggle.[53]

Secondly, their concept of gender justice. Muslim feminists consider justice to

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51 Jasr Audah, *al-Ijtihad al-Maqasyidi: min al-Tashawwur al-Ushuli ila al-Tanzil al-Amali,* (Beirut-Lebanon: al-Syabkah al-Arabiyah, 2013), 45–64.

52 Muhammad Baltaji, *Makanatul Mar'ah fi al-Qur'an al-Karim wa al-Sunnah al-Shahihah: al-Huquq al-Siyasiyah wa al-Ijtima'iyah wa al-Syakhshiyah li al-Mar'ati fi al-Mujtama'al-Islami,* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2000); Ali Jum'ah, *al-Islam wa al-Musawah, bayna al-Waqi' wa al-Ma'mul*, (Cairo: Dar al-Imbi'ath li al-Nasyr, 2020).

53 Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender...,* 247–264.

be synonymous with equality. Their struggle to uphold gender justice is demonstrated through presenting the Quranic and Hadith perspectives on gender equality. The equality they refer to is based on individual rights, an individualistic philosophy that forms the epistemological foundation for Western thinkers, including secular feminists. Influenced both epistemologically and ideologically, Muslim feminists also think individualistically, positioning men and women in opposition, with each perceived as striving for their respective rights and power, both in domestic and public spheres.

The efforts to reinterpret Quranic verses addressing the topics of men, women, and their relationships with the goal of unveiling messages of gender justice within them are commendable, as the holy book indeed commands Muslims to act justly. Moreover, the Quran is considered suitable for all times and places (*shalih li kulli zaman wa makan*), containing multiple meanings: [54] historical, contemporary, and futuristic. These meanings cannot be fully uncovered by scholars or Muslim thinkers of a single era. Each scholar or thinker can only discover certain meanings appropriate to the knowledge available in their time. The terms within the Quran can be understood by those living in that era. Asghar Ali Engineer even argued that not only Quranic verses contain normative and contextual meaning, but also symbolic meaning, hence it is necessary to do the reinterpretations towards Quranic verses not aligning with the interpreter's contextual situation.[55]

However, the Quran does not specifically discuss the concept and form of justice. It merely commands Prophet Muhammad and Muslims to uphold justice, providing numerous examples within its text. The concept of justice is the subject of various academic disciplines, each with its theories and definitions, such as political, theological, philosophical, ethical, legal, social justice, and so forth.[56] Therefore, understanding the concepts and theories of justice according to these academic disciplines is crucial to uncovering what the Quranic message of justice entails regarding men, women, and their relationships, suitable for the contemporary context and daily life of interpreters and their communities.

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54 Ali bin Abi Thalib said, "Do not argue them using the Quran, because it contains many aspects. (*la tujadilhum bi al-Qur'an, fa'innahu hammalu awjuhin).*" Nevertheless, this statement validity is doubted. Yusuf Qardowi, *Kayfa Nata'ammalu ma'a al-Qur'an?,* 7th ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2009), 46–48; Aksin Wijaya, "Maqāṣidi Tafsir: Uncovering and Presenting Maqāṣid Ilāhī-Qur'anī into Contemporary Context", *Al-Jami'ah* 59, no. 2 (2021): 449–478. https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2021.592.449-478.

55 Asghar Ali Engineer, *Hak-hak Perempuan dalam Islam …*, 64-65.

56 Majid Khadduri, *Teologi Keadilan Perspektif Islam*, trans. by H. Mochtar Zoerni and Joko S. Kahhar (Surabaya: Risalah Gusti, 1999).

Negotiating the Quran's Message of Gender Justice

The groups engaged in discussions about men, women, and their relationships within the Quran are fundamentally grappling with epistemological issues. Epistemology concerns the discovery of truth. Given the diversity of epistemologies, and that a single epistemological model can only uncover one dimension of truth from the subject under study, the truths derived from Islamic thought based on the Quran and Hadith are also diverse,[57] a fact that merits appreciation. However, this diversity vanishes when epistemology itself transforms into an ideology, making truth singular — the truth claimed by that ideology.

On the other hand, human thought is situational. It is produced by individuals living in specific spaces and times, making it meaningful and suitable only for the particular society in which it was produced. It may not necessarily hold meaning or suitability for other societies. Therefore, it becomes problematic from an axiological standpoint when such singular thought is applied across different spatial and temporal contexts, as it may not be meaningful or suitable for them.

Consequently, there needs to be a negotiation between epistemology, which speaks about discovering truth, and axiology, which deals with finding meaningfulness. Among the theories capable of undertaking this negotiation task is maqasidic interpretation,[58] an interpretative theory oriented towards unveiling three categories of Quranic meanings: textual, ideal-moral, and spirit-contextual (also known as productive meaning or meaningful meaning) and negotiating these with the conditions of the readers and their communities.[59]

The textual meaning of the Quran might be meaningful and suitable for a particular society and therefore should be embraced, but it may not be so for another society, in which case it can be set aside. The ideal-moral meaning of the Quran might be relevant and appropriate for certain societies and thus adopted, but it may not resonate with others, allowing for its dismissal. Similarly, the spirit-contextual meaning of the Quran might be significant and fitting for specific communities and should be taken up, but it might not be for others, and thus can be left aside.[60]

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57 Aksin Wijaya, *Satu Islam Ragam Epistemologi: Menyingkap Pergeseran Epistemology Islam, dari Epistemologi Teosentris ke Antroposentris* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2020).

58 Aksin Wijaya, *Fenomena Berislam*..., 56–57.

59 Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Pendekatan Ma'nā-cum-Maghzā atas Al-Qur'an: Paradigma, Prinsip dan Metode Penafsiran" (Ma'nā-Cum-Maghzā Approach to the Quran: Paradigm, Principles, and Methods of Interpretation), Inaugural Lecture of the Professor in the Field of Tafsir Studies Delivered at the Open Senate Meeting of the Islamic State University (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Wednesday, Sept. 7, 2022, 14–16.

60 Muhammad Baltaji, *Minhaju Umar bin Khaththab fi al-Tasyri': Dirasah Mustau'abah li Fiqhi Umar wa Tanzimatihi*, 3rd edition. (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2006); Muhammad Said al-Asymawi, *al-Islam al-Siyasi*,

In line with this, the categorization of Quranic meanings into equality[61] and difference[62] regarding men, women, and their relationships should be both appreciated and negotiated. The category of equal meaning between men and women as offered by the Quran, related to certain elements, needs to be appreciated and negotiated with the conditions of specific readers and communities, just as the category of inequality related to other elements also needs to be appreciated and negotiated. Every law that applies to men essentially also applies to women, but in instances where they are declared different, the laws for each are inherently different.[63]

These two categories of Quranic meaning should not be viewed as a form of gender injustice towards women, eliminating the need to reinterpret verses that display their inequality. Rather, what requires reconsideration is the view equating justice with equality, as there is no Quranic verse explicitly stating this. The Quran commands Prophet Muhammad and Muslims to act justly, but the exact form of justice intended by the Quran is not explicitly defined. It could mean balance, equality, giving each person their due rights, or an abundance of existence.[64]

Justice is absolute, while equality is relative. The relative is a part of the absolute. God is the Most Just, not the Most Equal. Absolute justice means giving each person their due rights. God is Most Just in the sense that He grants to humans what is rightfully theirs, but He also acts to establish equality, as equality is a part of justice. However, acting justly does not necessarily mean establishing equality.

5th ed. (Beirut-Lebanon: al-Intisyar al-Arabi, 2004), 91–96, 343–353; Mustafa Akyol, *Reopening Muslim Minds*, trans. by Nina Nurmila (Bandung: Mizan, 2023), 233–266; Jasr Audah, *al-Ijtihad al-Maqasyidi: min al-Tashawwur al-Ushului ila al-Tanzil al-Amali* (Maqasidic Ijtihad: From Fundamental Conception to Practical Application) (Beirut-Lebanon: al-Syabkah al-Arabiyah, 2013), 45–64. Another similar instance is the suitability of Islamic teaching on da'wa. While the different groups performing da'wa based on their schools, ideologies, or strategies, there is an ideal-moral meaning in Islamic teaching, in particular of da'wah Islamiyah, namely calling for Islam as religion of salvation. Agus Setyawan, "Dakwah Yang Menyelamatkan: Memaknai Ulang Hakikat Dan Tujuan Da'wah Islamiyah". *Al-Adabiya: Jurnal Kebudayaan Dan Keagamaan 15, 2* (2020): 189-99. https://doi.org/10.37680/adabiya.v15i02.487

61   Muhammad Baltaji, *Makanatul Mar'ah fi al-Qur'an al-Karim wa al-Sunnah al-Shahihah...*, 69–93.

62   Muhammad Baltaji, *Makanatul Mar'ah fi al-Qur'an al-Karim wa al-Sunnah al-Shahihah...*, 95–382.

63   Muhammad Baltaji, *Makanatul Mar'ah fi al-Qur'an al-Karim wa al-Sunnah al-Shahihah...*, 61–67.

64   According to Muththahhari, the justice has various meanings, *firstly,* balance, which usually relates to certain system, such as natural or communal system. *Secondly*, non-discriminative equation, which usually relates to individuals. If we are to look every individuals equally, without discrimination or privilege, then the justice means equality. *Thirdly*, distribution of things or matters to anyone according to the right. A man of justice is those giving to other people based on their rights, not necessarily similar or equal. This justice meaning relates to preserving individuals' rights. *Fourthly*, abundance of existence, which especially relates to the right of Allah to distribute things or matters differently to each being. Murtadha Muththahhari, *al-Adl al-Ilahi*, trans. By. Muhammad Abdul Mun'im al-Khoqani, 2rd ed., (Tt. 1981), 68-77; John Rawl, *A Theory of Justice (Teori Keadilan): Dasar-dasar Filsafat Politik untuk Mewujudkan Kesejahteraan Sosial dalam Negara*, trans. By. Uzair Fauzen, Heru Prasetyo, 2rd ed. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2011); Majid Khadduri, *Teologi Keadilan Perspektif Islam*, translated by H. Mochtar Zoerni and Joko S. Kahhar (Surabaya: Risalah Gusti, 1999).

Enforcing equality on aspects that inherently differ can lead to injustice, just as not enforcing equality can be just if the situation demands it.[65]

To avoid misunderstandings in addressing the two categories of Quranic meaning about men, women, and their relationships as mentioned above, it is crucial to differentiate between two key terms: discrimination and differentiation. Discrimination occurs at the giver's end, while differentiation pertains to the receiver.[66] If someone gives different portions to those who are equal, that person can be said to be acting discriminatively, and such action is deemed unjust. However, if someone gives different portions to those who are different (not equal), that action is not considered discriminatory because it is based on the condition of the recipients, namely, differentiation. Such an action can be considered just. It would actually be discriminatory and unjust to give the same to those who are different (differentiation).

However, this understanding must be balanced with an understanding of the identity of the individual and the society that is the partner in negotiation. Society is a collection of individuals, and individuals are parts of society. Yet, society undergoes objectification and becomes an independent objective reality, separate from the individuals, so its existence cannot be controlled by the individuals that constitute it. A society that has gained such independent existence may have the same will as the individual, or it may have a different and autonomous will. If both have the same will, there is no issue. The problem arises when their wills are different, even contradictory. Which should be prioritized between the two?

In cases of differing wills between the two, some sociologists state that the will of society should be prioritized. As an objective reality, society creates norms and assigns specific roles to individuals, thereby limiting their absolute freedom to take on roles different from those determined by society. This means that society determines the roles of individuals, as behind these roles lie societal expectations. These expectations constitute social norms that serve as ethical standards and assign roles to individuals, who must perform these roles based on ethics.[67] Among these ethical roles is to place individuals in appropriate or balanced positions so that they receive their rights according to their status, including both rights and responsibilities, in both domestic and public spheres.

Given that the societal conditions, such as in Indonesia, for example, are still predominantly influenced by the community over the individual, and the culture

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65   Sulthan bin Abdurrahman al-Amiri, *Qadhaya al-Hurriyah...*, 81.

66   Murtadha Muththahhari, *al-Adl al-Ilahi...*, 128-129.

67   David Berry, *Pokok-Pokok Pikiran dalam Sosiologi*, trans. by Paulus Wirutomo, 3rd ed. (Jakarta: Rajawali Press, 1995).

embraced by society is patriarchal, particularly in rural areas, men are still viewed as more appropriate bearers of responsibility for leadership within the family and the community at large, though not exclusively. In such societies, individuals, regardless of gender, are accorded rights and obligations, albeit in unequal proportions. For example, both men and women have rights and duties, but their shares are not necessarily equal.

For instance, in Islam, both men and women have the right to inheritance (al-Nisa': 7), but the division of the inheritance is not necessarily equal. The initial division of inheritance between male and female children adopts a 2:1 scheme as the primary meaning of inheritance in the Quran (al-Nisa': 11), and this scheme can be considered just, and is meaningful in such societies. This division is not discrimination, but differentiation, as it is based on the societal conditions of the recipients, which sociologically and culturally still differentiate the positions and roles of men and women.

However, if within a family and society men and women are truly placed in equal positions, then what is sought and derived from the Quran is its spirit-contextual or dynamically contemporary significant meaning, that is, a meaning of equality. In such families and societies, the rightful inheritance given to both male and female children would be on a 1:1 scheme. This is where the negotiation between epistemology, speaking of truth, and axiology, discussing meaningfulness, occurs.

Conclusion

This study reveals three primary findings regarding the interpretative approaches of Muslim feminists toward Quranic gender discourse. First, Muslim feminists have significantly contributed to raising awareness about women's fundamental rights and challenging patriarchal biases in Quranic interpretations. Their efforts have influenced both academic discourse and social movements, leading to increased participation of women in various public and domestic roles. However, this achievement has also sparked controversy, as their reinterpretations often diverge from classical exegetical traditions and emphasize gender equality as the core of justice.

Second, the findings indicate that the interpretative logic employed by Muslim feminists has shifted from a social-analytical to an ideological framework. This shift is evidenced by the tendency to prioritize verses that support gender equality while reinterpreting or dismissing those suggesting gender differentiation. Consequently, their hermeneutical practices, often rooted in contextual and maqasidic approaches, reflect a strong ideological orientation that can overlook the sociocultural contexts in

which the Quranic text was revealed. The concept of gender justice, according to the Quran, does not equate justice with absolute equality but rather with fairness, which may involve differentiated roles and responsibilities to maintain social harmony.

Despite these findings, this research has certain limitations. It does not extensively explore the potential application of maqasidic interpretation in diverse cultural contexts. Future research could benefit from examining how different Muslim societies interpret and implement Quranic concepts of gender justice. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies involving gender theory, Islamic jurisprudence, and sociological perspectives may provide more comprehensive insights into the evolving dynamics of Quranic gender discourse.

Acknowledgements

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