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## Rereading *Al-Rijāl Qawwāmūn 'Alā Al-Nisā'*; Feminist Interpretations Of Surah Al-Nisa' (34) In Contemporary Muslim Households

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### Abstract:

The issue of gender equality in Islam is often shaped by textual interpretations that appear to favor men over women. This study critically examines the traditional interpretation of Q.S. al-Nisa' (34), frequently cited to justify male superiority over women. The research aims to explore alternative contextual readings proposed by Muslim feminist scholars. Using library research and an interpretative approach, the study analyzes gender-related Qur'anic verses in light of contemporary realities. Primary sources include books and academic journals discussing gender in Qur'anic exegesis. The findings highlight the importance of understanding Q.S. al-Nisa' (34) within its historical, social, and cultural context at the time of revelation. Muslim feminists argue that the terms *al-rijāl* and *al-nisā'* do not refer strictly to biological males and females, but to masculine and feminine qualities, which may be present in both genders. This perspective reframes the husband's role in the family—not as an oppressive authority figure, but as a responsible guardian committed to justice and mutual welfare. Such contextual interpretation promotes a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender roles in Islam, encouraging partnership and cooperation between spouses in both domestic and social spheres.

**Keywords:** *Gender Equality, Muslim Feminists, Tafsir.*

## INTRODUCTION

The discourse on gender equality and women's issues remains a contentious topic of discussion in society and has become a subject of study from various scientific perspectives.<sup>1</sup> The 2021 Global Gap Index report in Humaira, Mustaqim, and Taufik's research (2021)

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<sup>1</sup> Hilmi Ridho, "Mengkritisi Keadilan Perempuan Dari Bilik-Bilik Pesantren," in *Muktamar Pemikiran Santri Nusantara; Islam, Kearifan Lokal, Dan Tantangan Kontemporer*, ed. Muhamad Sofi Mubarak et al. (Jakarta: Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2018), 799.

states that the level of gender inequality in Indonesia has increased, so that it is ranked 101 far below Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, and Timor Leste.<sup>2</sup> The latest research from the World Bank cited by Ruslan and Saputra (2023) shows that Indonesia scored 64.38 in the aspect of implementing gender equality.<sup>3</sup> Gender inequality is particularly visible in the field of education. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Education shows that although educational participation between men and women is relatively equal at the basic level, there are striking inequalities in access, quality, and outcomes of education, especially at the higher education level and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields.<sup>4</sup>

The data above shows the fact that although the majority of Indonesia's population adheres to the teachings of Islam, respect for women as a form of gender equality and justice is still very low. Moreover, today's society - especially women - is considered to have a low quality of literacy and understanding in accessing Islamic literature with gender justice.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in Indonesia, there are organizations or groups defending gender equality, such as the National Commission on Human Rights for Women and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as the formers of the Indonesian Women Ulema Congress (KUPI).<sup>6</sup> However, the movement of these organizations does not give rise to an established conceptual framework, so people become confused and do not understand the key terms of gender equality and justice. This is one of the factors in the inequality between men and women, leading to discrimination, subordination, and marginalization.

Gender differences should not be a serious problem as long as it does not cause inequality between men and women, but in reality, gender differences create injustice.<sup>7</sup> The real evidence can be seen from the phenomenon of sexual violence that is currently rife in Indonesia. It occurs in educational institutions, such as schools, colleges, and even boarding schools, which are considered moral and civilized places. Instead of boarding schools being used as a place to educate the nation's children,<sup>8</sup> it is used as a place of sexual harassment by the boarding schools administrators and leaders themselves. As in the viral case of the rape of female students in one of the boarding schools in Bandung and Jombang.<sup>9</sup>

Cases of rape, sexual harassment, and violence against women are influenced by the old paradigm. In other words, Muslims until now still adhere to patriarchy, which considers women's caste to be below men. The mindset that is built is power, where men have full

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<sup>2</sup> Dzalfa Farida Humaira, Abdul Mustaqim, and Egi Tanadi Taufik, "Kontestasi Wacana Tafsir Berkeadilan Gender Di Indonesia; Telaah Konsep-Konsep Kunci," *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 7, no. 1 (2022): 60–74.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Ruslan and Taufiq Aris Saputra, "Tinjauan Al-Qur'an Terhadap Kesetaraan Gender Dalam Pembagian Warisan (Studi Analisis Pada Surah Al-Nisa' Ayat 11)," *JADID: Journal of Quranic Studies and Islamic Communication* 3, no. 1 (2023): 17–50.

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Hotman Syahmahita Damanik, Oman Sukmana, and Wahyudi Winarjo, "Sosiologi Kritis Dan Transformasi Pendidikan: Menggugat Ketidaksetaraan Gender Di Indonesia," *Didaktika: Jurnal Kependidikan* 14, no. 2 (2025): 2031–2048.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Riad, Faizaluddin, and Romaida, "Penguatan Pendidikan Gender (Tela'ah Kritis Dalam Perspektif Islam)," *Symfonia: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 2, no. 2 (2022): 165–178.

<sup>6</sup> Amrin Ma'ruf, Wilodati, and Tutin Aryanti, "Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia Dalam Wacana Merebut Tafsir Gender Pasca Reformasi: Sebuah Tinjauan Genealogi," *Musawa Jurnal Studi Gender dan Islam* 20, no. 2 (2021): 127–146. Read more: Hilmi Ridho and Mirwan, "Reconciliation of Ulama and Umara in Socio-Political Conflict through Sufistic Approach," *Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* 33, no. 2 (2022): 345–358.

<sup>7</sup> Mansour Fakih, *Analisis Gender Dan Transformasi Sosial* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1997), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ulil Abshar Abdallah et al., *Pesantren; Kemandirian & Jangkar Sosial*, ed. Waryono Abdul Ghafur and Winuhoro Hanumbhawono, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Jakarta Pusat: Direktorat Pendidikan Diniyah Dan Pondok Pesantren Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam Kementerian Agama RI, 2022), 179.

<sup>9</sup> Dede Cindy Aprilia, Abdul Mu'ti, and Sururin, "Kekerasan Seksual Di Lingkungan Pesantren," *Journal on Education* 05, no. 01 (2022): 669.

power over women with the argument of surah al-Nisa verse: 34.<sup>10</sup> This understanding is so strong amid society that it has become an entrenched doctrine that is difficult to eradicate. Moreover, rural communities in Indonesia see women only as creatures who have a soft, neat, and graceful nature. So that their role is only worthy of being a housewife who always serves the needs and desires of men. More than that, women who work and have their income will be judged as bad women and considered a disgrace.<sup>11</sup>

The strength of this patriarchal system to become a culture amid society is influenced by four factors, including; first, patriarchy has long been a culture and has been deeply rooted. Second, political factors that have not fully favored women and more often prioritize men in all aspects. Third, economic factors with the existence of a global capital system that often exploits women. Fourth, the interpretation of religious texts that are dominated by the ideology of the patriarchal system.<sup>12</sup> These four factors are the construction of a community paradigm, not the teachings of Islam in the Qur'an and Hadith. This is because, in essence, Islam highly values women, and the Qur'an as its holy book strongly emphasizes gender equality in the sight of Allah SWT.<sup>13</sup>

One proof that the Qur'an has elevated the dignity of women is the enshrinement of the word 'woman' into a surah al-Nisa in the Muslim holy book.<sup>14</sup> The position of women and men are equal before Allah SWT as servants and caliphs on this earth,<sup>15</sup> but there is one thing that can distinguish them, namely their piety.<sup>16</sup> Spiritually and intellectually, Islam considers the position of men equal to women,<sup>17</sup> the difference only lies in the physical aspect based on the principle of a fair division of labor.<sup>18</sup> Men are given the heavy responsibility as leaders to look after and manage their families,<sup>19</sup> while women are entrusted with taking care of the household, nurturing, and educating the children.<sup>20</sup>

Although in reality the Qur'an has elevated the dignity of women and does not discriminate against them, some understandings demean and consider the status of women below men.<sup>21</sup> A closed and narrow interpretation of the Qur'anic verses will limit the space for the meaning contained in the Qur'an. More than that, this kind of understanding is feared

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<sup>10</sup> Haikal Fadhil Anam, "Tafsir Feminisme Islam," *MAGHZA: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 4, no. 2 (2019): 162.

<sup>11</sup> Dina Dwikurniari, "Peranan Perempuan Di Luar Rumah Tangga Dalam Perspektif Historis," *MOZAIK: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora* 2, no. 1 (2007): 7.

<sup>12</sup> Abdul Mustaqim, *Paradigma Tafsir Feminis Membaca Al-Qur'an Dengan Optik Perempuan: Studi Pemikiran Riffat Hassan Tentang Isu Gender Dalam Islam* (Yogyakarta: Logung Pustaka, 2008), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Siti Musda Mulia, *Indahnya Islam Menyuarakan Kesenjangan & Keadilan Gender* (Yogyakarta: Naufan Pustaka, 2014), 89.

<sup>14</sup> Adib Gunawan, "Interpretasi Hadis Tentang Penciptaan Perempuan Dari Tulang Rusuk Laki-Laki Dan Kesenjangan Gender Menurut M. Fethullah Gulen" 2, no. 2 (2022): 280.

<sup>15</sup> Hilmi Ridho, "Membumikan Nilai-Nilai Keadilan Dalam Al-Qur'an Terhadap Sila Keadilan Sosial," *Humanistika* 7, no. 2 (2021): 151–189.

<sup>16</sup> Agustin Hanafi, "Pemahaman Yang Bias Gender," *Takammul: Jurnal Studi Gender dan Islam serta Perlindungan Anak* Vol 6, no. 2 (2017): 123.

<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "Women in the Workplace: Shari'ah and Contemporary Perspectives," *ICR Journal* 6, no. 3 (2015): 294–317.

<sup>18</sup> Robin Finlay and Peter Hopkins, "Young Muslim Women's Political Participation in Scotland: Exploring the Intersections of Gender, Religion, Class and Place," *Political Geography* 74, no. August 2018 (2019): 102046.

<sup>19</sup> Yusuf M. Sidani, *Muslim Women at Work: Religious Discourses in Arab Society, Research Handbook of Diversity and Careers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Springer, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Annisa R. Beta, "Commerce, Piety and Politics: Indonesian Young Muslim Women's Groups as Religious Influencers," *New Media and Society* 21, no. 10 (2019): 20.

<sup>21</sup> Hastanti Widy Nugroho, *Diskriminasi Gender (Potret Perempuan Dalam Hegemoni Laki-Laki) Suatu Tinjauan Filsafat Moral* (Yogyakarta: Hanggar Kreator, 2004).

to be able to divert the intention and core purpose of the verse.<sup>22</sup> Of the many verses of the Qur'an, there is one verse that is often used as a basis for placing women under men, namely Q.S. al-Nisa's: 34. Mufasirs consider this verse to give more rights to men than women. In addition, scholars' interpretations are sometimes influenced by the ideology of the patriarchal system, so the majority of interpretations are not based on universal religious values. It is often used to legitimize violence against women.<sup>23</sup> This is influenced by the different interpretations of the mufasirs of the Qur'an because different ways of interpretation tend to produce different gender constructions.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, hermeneutics is present to restore the message of gender justice in the Qur'an.

This hermeneutic approach is used to reduce one's tendencies and emotions in interpreting and understanding sacred texts so that the interpretation is not subjective. This is because the study of hermeneutics itself stands on the study of language, history, and contextualization.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the feminist movement uses hermeneutics as an instrument to criticize ideologies and cultures that treat women unfairly.<sup>26</sup> They want to break down and deconstruct the social system that always harms women's position.<sup>27</sup> As Fatima Mernissi asserts, the reconstruction of sacred texts has been manipulated by feudal groups for personal and group interests to perpetuate male power over women, thus characterizing the power structure in Muslim society.<sup>28</sup>

Research on feminist interpretation has been carried out by many previous researchers, including; the first, research by Muhamad Yoga Firdaus, Suryana Alfathah, Eni Zulaiha, Edi Komarudin, Dedi Junaedi, Sholikul Hadi (2022), the accentuation of this research aims to discuss the development of feminist interpretation in Indonesia through the existence of Hussein Muhammad's thought. The conclusion is that the paradigmatic transition initiated by Thomas Kuhn is used in Indonesian feminist interpretation, thus experiencing a paradigm shift in various levels, ranging from classical, modern, to contemporary eras. One of the mufasirs whose work is mapped in the contemporary era is Husein Muhammad.<sup>29</sup>

Second, research conducted by Siti Robikah (2019) to see the development of Al-Qur'an methods and approaches from classical to contemporary, where this research emphasizes the feminist approach in Indonesia. The conclusion of Robikah's research shows that tafsir in Indonesia has developed over time. Many contemporary mufasirs have emerged using their methods and approaches. For example, Siti Musda Mulia is a female intellectual who opposes the practice of polygamy because it is considered contrary to the principles and purpose of

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<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Hanif and Laila Nadzifatus Syarifah, "Hermeneutika Adil Gender Menurut Ulama Kontemporer Dalam Studi Al-Qur'an," *Yinyang: Jurnal Studi Islam Gender dan Anak* 17, no. 2 (2022): 182–183.

<sup>23</sup> Mufidah Cholil, *Psikologi Keluarga Islam: Berwawasan Gender* (Malang: UIN Maliki Press, 2013), 239.

<sup>24</sup> Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika Dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*, 1st ed. (Yogyakarta: Nawasea Press, 2017), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Mohammad Firmansyah et al., "When Traditional Meets Modern Pedagogies: A Case Study of Ma'had Aly Situbondo," *EDUKASI: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Agama Dan Keagamaan* 23, no. 1 (2025): 192–207.

<sup>26</sup> Rohmatul Izzad, "Konsep Kesetaraan Gender Dalam Islam," *AL ITQAN: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an* 4, no. 2 (2018): 31.

<sup>27</sup> Hilmi Ridho, "Membangun Toleransi Beragama Berlandaskan Konsep Moderasi Dalam Al-Qur'an Dan Pancasila," *An-Natig* 1, no. 1 (2020): 92–105.

<sup>28</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and The Male Elite; a Feminist Interpretation of Women's Right in Islam*, (USA: Welsey Publishing, 1991), 9.

<sup>29</sup> Muhamad Yoga Firdaus et al., "Menilik Perkembangan Tafsir Feminis Di Indonesia Ala Thomas Kuhn: Studi Atas Pemikiran Husein Muhammad," *Reslaji: Religion Education Social Laa Roiba Journal* 4, no. 3 (2022): 545–553.

marriage. According to her, no human being today meets the criteria for fairness in polygamy except for the Prophet Muhammad, and polygamy causes more problems than benefits.<sup>30</sup>

Third, a journal by Atik Wardani (2013) which discusses the interpretation of gender verses in *Tafsir al-Misbah* by M. Quraish Shihab. The results of his research confirm that M. Quraish Shihab's gender vision tries to place women's rights equal to men, both rights outside the home, political rights, the right to education, and so on related to the humanitarian field. According to M. Quraish Shihab, the Qur'an does not discriminate against women, rather the Qur'an discusses the importance of elevating the dignity of women.<sup>31</sup> This opinion is in line with the words of Kecia Ali that women's rights must be fulfilled by a man, both inside and outside the home.<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, the research journal of Andian Husaini and Rahmatul Husni (2015) emphasizes its study of the history of the feminist movement in the West and the issue of feminist hermeneutics. The results of the discussion explain that the methodology of Biblical interpretation among Christian feminists cannot be applied to the Muslim holy book, because the Qur'an is not a cultural text as understood by feminists who use a hermeneutic foundation. In addition, regarding gender issues, Allah SWT has divided roles for men and women to complement each other. The difference in roles does not mean that Allah SWT discriminates against women, precisely that is the meaning of gender equality and justice.<sup>33</sup>

The above dialectic raises a question; why are there still many textual tafsir studies that are full of discrimination against women? What exactly is behind feminist interpretations that lead to gender inequality? How is the Muslim feminist contextual interpretation of the gender verse al-Nisa's (4): 34? This research tries to criticize the views of textualist groups that always prioritize men and demean women. Therefore, there needs to be a progressive renewal of interpretation that is in line with the dynamics of the times and can read the problems of feminism. This interpretation is what is expected by the feminist movement to eliminate patriarchal culture so that there will be no more gender inequality in the minds of the people.

This type of research uses library research by adopting some of the qualitative approach techniques. More precisely, this study is more about the contextual interpretation approach of gender versus the dynamics of the times. The data sources of this research are taken from the books of tafsir, books, and journals that are directly related to gender interpretation in the Qur'an.<sup>34</sup> The data collection technique uses documentation techniques by collecting all written data and then selecting data relevant to this research as the main data source. The data analysis uses content analysis, which is a form of research that includes the process of collecting data, compiling and explaining the data, and then analyzing its content. In other terms, this research is a descriptive analysis.<sup>35</sup>

## DISCUSSION

### Gender Equality; A Discourse and Perspective

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<sup>30</sup> Siti Robikah, "Pergeseran Paradigma Tafsir Al-Quran: Analisis Terhadap Tafsir Feminis Di Indonesia," *Analisis: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 19, no. 1 (2019): 105–128.

<sup>31</sup> Atik Wartini, "Tafsir Feminis M. Quraish Shihab: Telaah Ayat-Ayat Gender Dalam Tafsir Al-Misbah," *Palastren* 6, no. 2 (2013): 473–494.

<sup>32</sup> Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (England: Oneworld Publications 185, 2006), 47.

<sup>33</sup> Adian Husaini and Rahmatul Husni, "Problematisasi Tafsir Feminis: Studi Kritis Konsep Kesetaraan Gender," *Al-Tabrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 15, no. 2 (2015): 367–388.

<sup>34</sup> Dedi Mulyana, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2017), 157.

<sup>35</sup> Bambang Prasetyo, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif* (Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, 2011), 165.

In Islam, the position of men and women is contrasted in various aspects, such as family responsibilities and leadership issues. This difference sometimes becomes sacrosanct, when a woman transgresses the limits of a man's position and becomes a sensitive topic of conversation among intellectuals. Although there are differences in the treatment of women when the Qur'an discusses the creation of women, Muslim feminists argue that there are no essential differences between men and women. Therefore, there is no indication that women have fewer or more limitations than men.<sup>36</sup>

The author disagrees with the above statement that there is a contrast between men and women in all respects. Islam never teaches discrimination against women. It is precisely Islam that liberates the condition of women from the bondage of jahiliyah culture. In the Jahiliyah period, the birth of a girl was a disgrace, so sometimes the parents had to kill her alive. Thanks to the Prophet SAW, the position of women can be saved and get the legality of their dignity. As a good Muslim, of course, this should be a reflection of maintaining the teachings of the Prophet SAW who never made a negative dichotomy on women.

Gender discussions are found in the Qur'an and Hadith, the issue of rights and positions between men and women are equal. This equality is seen in their duty as enforcers of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar. Contemporary Egyptian writer Muhammad Al-Ghazali said: "If life on earth is based on the choice of sincerity and loyalty, straightness of thought and truthfulness of behavior, the position of men and women is the same in these fields."<sup>37</sup>

The public's understanding of the wrong texts in the Qur'an and Hadith further perpetuates the patriarchal culture in society. The misinterpretation of the two sources of Islamic teachings affects the issue of the position of women. Not a few stereotype problems occur to women, such as women's minds being considered half of men's minds, receiving discrimination and illogical restrictions.

Gender inequality has been felt by women, including Muslim women, since almost a century ago. The feminist movement became an instrument of the struggle to create gender justice.<sup>38</sup> The notion of Islamic feminism began to be recognized in the 1990s.<sup>39</sup> Feminism developed in countries where the majority of the population is Muslim, such as Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The emergence of Islamic feminism seeks to uncover the sources of problems in Islamic teachings and ask the causes of gender inequality in the interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith.<sup>40</sup> Muslim feminist figures include Fatima Mernissi (Egypt), Nawal Sadawi (Egypt), Amina Wadud Muhsin (America), Riffat Hasan (Pakistan), Zakiah Adam, and Zainah Anwar (Malaysia), as well as several Indonesians, namely; Siti Chamamah Soeratno, Wardah Hafidz, Siti Ruhaina Dzuhayatin, Zakiah Daradjat, Ratna Megawangi, Siti Musda Mulia, Faqihuddin Abdul Qodir, Husein Muhammad, Nur Rofiah, and others.<sup>41</sup>

The emergence of the spirit of feminism attracted the attention of Muslim intellectuals to study gender issues in the Qur'an and Hadith, so they are known as Muslim feminists.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cahya Edi Setyawan, "Pemikiran Kesetaraan Gender Dan Feminisme Amina Wadud Tentang Eksistensi Wanita Dalam Kajian Hukum Keluarga," *Zawiyah Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 3, no. 1 (2017): 76.

<sup>37</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Perempuan* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2011), 52.

<sup>38</sup> Nurul Agustina, *Gerakan Feminisme Islam Dan Civil Society, Dalam Islam, Negara Dan Civil Society: Gerakan Dan Pemikiran Islam Kontemporer*, ed. Komaruddin Hidayat and Ahmad Gaus AF (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2005), 377.

<sup>39</sup> Shahrzad Mojab, "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism,'" *Feminist Review* 69, no. 1 (2001): 129.

<sup>40</sup> Shabana Fatma, *Woman and Islam* (New Delhi: Sumit Enterprises, 2007), 37.

<sup>41</sup> Andik Wahyun Muqoyyidun, "Wacana Kesetaraan Gender: Pemikiran Islam Kontemporer Tentang Gerakan Feminisme Islam," *Al-Ulum (Jurnal Studi-Studi Islam)* 13, no. 2 (2013): 504.

<sup>42</sup> Wiyatni, "Konstruksi Gender Dalam Novel Geni Jora Karya Abidah El-Khalieqy," *Humaniora* 22, no. 2 (2010): 200.

As explained by Baroroh, in fighting for gender equality, Muslim feminists put their attention on two things; first, gender inequality in the social structure of Muslim society does not originate from the existing teachings of Islam, but from a male-biased understanding which is then believed to be a standard Islamic teaching provision. Second, to achieve gender equality, it is necessary to reassess the sources of Islamic teachings that are closely related to gender issues, namely justice and equality.<sup>43</sup>

One of the Muslim feminist works that seriously discusses the position of women in the Qur'an is the book *Qur'an and Women* by Amina Wadud Muhsin. She elaborates quite concisely on the discussion of the position of women and reveals the spirit of egalitarianism. Amina also does not consider matriarchism as an alternative to patriarchy, which has been blamed for the subordination of women. In addition, she wants justice and cooperation between the sexes not only at the macro level (state and society) but also at the micro level (family). Therefore, Amina Wadud offers the Quranic hermeneutic method, which in its operation aims to get the determination of the substance of the verse. To achieve this substance, a mufasir must always correlate three perspectives, namely: [1] Knowing the context of the text that has been written; [2]. Knowing the grammatical construction and expression; [3] Knowing the whole text. With these three aspects, he believes that differences in interpretation can be extracted from modifying these three variations.<sup>44</sup>

The gender equality movement carried out by Amina Wadud was motivated by the inequality between men and women in all aspects so that women were marginalized. Amina then began to conduct various studies on the occurrence of gender inequality. The results of her research show that one of the causes is patriarchal culture.<sup>45</sup> This is because the majority of Qur'anic interpreters are dominated by men, so the tendency to favor men is more pronounced in their interpretations. Therefore, Amina attempts to make a reinterpretation of the Qur'anic texts that discuss women by using a hermeneutic approach.

The results of Amina Wadud's research are in line with Husein Muhammad's disagreement that the oppression that often occurs against women is initiated by the patriarchal ideology inherent in social society. This ideology then turns into religious teachings for the benefit of a particular group and goal. As a feminist cleric, Husein defends women, because he considers the issue of violence and oppression against women to be very contrary to the ideals of Islam, namely realizing human justice. Husein's attention to women's issues is nothing but for the sake of justice and gender equality and calling for a religion that is *rahmatan lil `alamin*.<sup>46</sup>

Besides Amina, another female Muslim feminist figure who is no less phenomenal is Fatima Mernissi. She challenged the interpretation of Qur'anic verses such as in surah al-Ahzab verse: 53, which is used by scholars as the basis for the institution of hijab. Based on this verse, there has been a separation that only men can play a role in the public sector, while women can only play a role in the domestic sphere. This is criticized by Mernissi that this kind of interpretation must be dismantled by restoring meaning based on its historical context. Mernissi also argues that the position of men and women is equal. She based this statement on the Qur'anic text that recounts Umm Salamah's protest to the Prophet

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<sup>43</sup> Umul Baroroh, *Feminisme Dan Feminis Muslim, Dalam Pemahaman Islam Dan Tantangan Keadilan Gender*, ed. Sri Suhandjati (Yogyakarta: Gama Media, 2002), 201.

<sup>44</sup> Muhammad Fahrizal Amin, "Amina Wadud: Pendekatan Hermeneutika Untuk Gerakan Gender," *Al-Adyan: Jurnal Studi Lintas Agama* 15, no. 2 (2020): 237–254.

<sup>45</sup> Setyawan, "Pemikiran Kesetaraan Gender Dan Feminisme Amina Wadud Tentang Eksistensi Wanita Dalam Kajian Hukum Keluarga," 79.

<sup>46</sup> Andi Rabiatur, "Wacana Kesetaraan Gender Dalam Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis Menurut Husein Muhammad," *Raushan Fikir: Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa* 7, no. 1 (2018): 31.

Muhammad; "Why are only men mentioned in the Qur'an?" Then, verses related to equality were revealed such as surah al-Ahzab verse: 35 which is evidence of equality in the Qur'an.<sup>47</sup>

### Gender Interpretation: An Analysis of the Interpretation of al-Nisa's (4): 34 According to Muslim Feminist Figures

The problem of gender equality is partly influenced by textual interpretations that assume the Qur'an gives more space and rights to men than to women. This textual approach relies heavily on pre-modern interpretations of some Qur'anic texts. While this view of "unequal equality" may have been acceptable in pre-modern times and line with the current macro-context, contextual exegetes argue that the micro-context of today is very different from the macro-context of Islam at the time of the Prophet. This requires an actual interpretation of Qur'anic texts that have been used in classical Islam to justify gender inequality.

Many verses in the Qur'an explain the superiority of men, including women's testimony is considered half of a man's testimony (al-Baqarah: 228), men can beat their wives to teach them a lesson (al-Nisa': 32), women get half of what men get in inheritance (al-Nisa': 11), and it is permissible for men to marry more than one woman (al-Nisa': 3).<sup>48</sup> However, the author will only criticize one of the verses that are most often used to favor men over women, namely surah al-Nisa (4): 34. This verse explains that men are *qawwāmūn* (leaders) for women.

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَنَاطٌ حَافِظَاتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا كَبِيرًا

*The men are the leaders of the women because Allah has preferred some of them (men) over others (women), and because they (men) have spent some of their wealth. Therefore, virtuous women are those who obey God, and keep themselves in the absence of their husbands, because God has taken care of them. And those women whom you fear may be unfaithful, counsel them, separate them from their beds, and beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek to trouble them. Verily, Allah is Most High, Most Great.*

Classical scholars interpret the above verse with conclusions that still leave injustice for women. As Imam Al-Qurthubi interpreted leadership (*qawwāmūn*) is an incentive form of the word qiyam which means carrying out. This shows that men are the subject of the executor so everything related to him will be obedient to the executor. Almost in line with Al-Qurthubi, Imam At-Thabari in his tafsir explains that the leadership of men over women can be based on a reflection of physical strength, education, and the obligation to fulfill all obligations determined by Allah SWT. This advantage makes men above women.<sup>49</sup> Al-Alusi's opinion is also in line with the views of these two mufasirs that men as leaders of women are the same as a ruler to his people, namely having full rights to prohibit and rule.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ibnu Katsir, *Umdah Al-Tafsir Mukhtasar Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Adzim*, ed. Ahmad Syakir (Jakarta: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2001), Juz 1, 45.

<sup>48</sup> Arliana, "Humanisasi Perempuan Dalam Tafsir: Studi Pemikiran Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl" (Jakarta: UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2020), 30.

<sup>49</sup> Rahmawati Hunawa, "Kedudukan Suami-Istri (Kajian Surah an-Nisa' [4]: 34)," *Potret Pemikiran* 22, no. 1 (2018): 38.

<sup>50</sup> Syihabudin Sayyid Muhammad Al-Alusi, *Rub Al-Ma'navi Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Adzim Wa as-Sub'u Al-Matsani* (Yogyakarta: Idarah al-Tiba'ah al-Muniriyyah, 2000), 90.

According to Ali Ash-Shabuni, *qawwāmūn* means leader for two reasons; because men have the advantage of reason over women and men provide for their families. This kind of interpretation will give the impression that women are under the authority of a man, as a result, women must obey their husbands, both at home and outside the home. This view is in line with Imam Baidlawi's interpretation that men become leaders for women because they have the advantage of reason and are capable of trying to provide for their families. Imam Ar-Razi also interpreted *qawwāmūn* as a man who has responsibility for his wife's education and protecting his family and has advantages in nature and law. Thus, a man should be the leader and decision-maker. While Imam At-Thabari interpreted *qawwāmūn* as a male educator and guide for his wife in carrying out obligations to Allah SWT and obligations to her husband.

The views of the classical mufasirs above have received a lot of attention and criticism from Muslim feminists, one of whom is Amina Wadud Muhsin. She openly criticizes the literalistic-textualist's interpretation that gender injustice in the interpretation of classical scholars is caused by not being able to understand religious texts about women as a whole. She divides the interpretation into three styles; first, traditional interpretation. This interpretation uses certain subjects according to the interests and abilities of the mufasir. The second is reactive interpretation. This interpretation contains the reaction of modern thinkers to some obstacles experienced by women that are ascribed to the Qur'an. The issues discussed and the methods used are often derived from the ideas of feminists and rationalists but without a comprehensive analysis of the verses concerned. Third, holistic interpretation. This interpretation uses all methods of interpretation and relates to various social, moral, economic, political issues, and women's issues that arise in the modern era.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the classical interpretation, the Muslim feminist view in interpreting gender verses seems to be more contextual and elastic. For example, Khaled Abou El-Fadl in interpreting the word *qawwāmūn* focuses more on the meaning of the context, namely, men are protectors and supporters of women by the advantages that Allah SWT bestows on some over others. Although the word *qawwāmūn* can be interpreted in various ways, it does not determine the relationship between women and men in a fixed and definite way but rather depends on the situation and social changes in society.

Syahrur also supports this opinion by saying that the word *qawwāmūn* means men as leaders had a general context at that time because men are the breadwinners of the family. Thus, this expression does not at all symbolize the weakness of women as interpreted by many circles. For Syahrur, this view is the basis for building an explanation of the thought of interpreting this verse from the beginning of its redaction. According to him, the word *qawwāmūn* means the devotion of men to women, so it can be understood that this verse refers more to social functions than to the advantages of a particular gender and describes more contextual statements, not textual statements.<sup>52</sup>

Male superiority as described in surah al-Nisa` (4): 34, according to Husein Muhammad is a contextual sociological verse. The verse was revealed as a response to the social history of the Arabs at that time. This can be seen from the text of the verse itself which is in the form of a narrative, not a normative text. The superiority of men over women and the obligation of male maintenance are social and cultural realities of Arabia. Long before Islam was present, the Arab social structure had domesticated women and even put them in a

<sup>51</sup> Amina Wadud Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti Sdn bhd, 1994), 1–3.

<sup>52</sup> Abdus Shomad, "Otoritas Laki-Laki Dan Perempuan: Studi Penafsiran Kontekstual Abdullah Saeed Terhadap Qs. an-Nisa 4: 34," *Jurnal AlijLam: Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2022): 13.

continuously oppressed position.<sup>53</sup> From a cultural perspective, Arab women had no rights over their bodies and were even seen as sex slaves and mere pleasures for men. All their rights were completely under the control of men. Caliph Umar bin Khattab once said, "For a long time we Arabs have never recognized the rights of women. When Islam came and called them by name, I realized that they had autonomous rights."<sup>54</sup>

### Contextualizing al-Nisa's (4): 34 in Domestic Issues

In the context of the household, the authority of the husband and the role of women are often the subject of debate in the study of Qur'anic interpretation. Q.S. Al-Nisa: 34, which regulates the husband's role as *qawwāmūn* or leader of the household, has become a reference in understanding the authority of men in the family. The word *qawwāmūn* is often translated as "leader" or "protector," which can position men as responsible figures in the family, both financially and emotionally. However, more traditional interpretations of this verse often lead to an understanding that suggests male dominance over women, which ignores women's rights and the potential for equality in husband-wife relationships.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, more progressive approaches highlight that the husband's role as a leader should be seen in the context of responsibility and not as a form of domination. The wife's role as a companion is also a crucial element that cannot be overlooked in this relationship, as married couples are expected to support and collaborate in maintaining family harmony.

A more modern and contextual interpretation of this verse leads us to consider aspects of gender equality in family relationships. Husbands and wives should share responsibilities in household life, not based on domination, but based on the principles of cooperation and mutual respect in today's context. This suggests that the authority given to husbands as *qawwāmūn* should be understood in terms of more inclusive and equitable responsibilities. Saeed's contextual approach emphasizes that the husband's authority is not an unlimited power, but rather a responsibility to maintain the welfare of the family and support equality in household relations.

According to Saeed (2006), to understand the meaning of the verse, it is necessary to look at the broader social and cultural aspects at the time the Qur'an was revealed, where society at that time had a patriarchal structure. However, nowadays with the development of gender equality, contextual interpretation leads to the understanding that this verse should no longer be understood simply as a legitimization for men to dominate women. Instead, it should be the basis of a mutually supportive and respectful relationship, where both parties have equal rights to participate in decision-making and contribute to household life.<sup>56</sup>

The word *qawwāmūn* (leadership) is seen by some Muslim women scholars as equality, making men the leader of the household and fully responsible for their wives and children, including providing for them financially. Hifat Jawad, a British academic agrees that husbands have a duty of responsibility over their families. However, a man's rank of leadership should not be used as a tool to become a dictator over his wife. If the husband abuses his power, then the wife has the right to intervene to improve the situation. Jawad added that verse 34 of surah al-Nisa` must be understood in the context of the household. He identifies the Qur'anic moral ideal as an equal relationship that has been transformed among Muslims by authoritarianism.

<sup>53</sup> Husein Muhammad, *Islam Agama Ramah Perempuan: Pembelaan Kiai Pesantren* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2004), 249.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 249–250.

<sup>55</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Al-Qur'an Abad 21; Tafsir Kontekstual* (Bandung: Mizan, 2016), 183.

<sup>56</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting The Qur'an* (USA: Roudledge, 2006), 90–91.

Riffat Hasan states that the word *qawwāmūn* is related to economic issues, i.e. the breadwinner. She points out that al-Nisa` (4): 34, especially the first sentence is normative because not all men provide for their wives. According to her, although the Qur'an explicitly makes men the breadwinners, this certainly does not mean that women cannot earn their living.<sup>57</sup> Amina Wadud, Azizah Al-Hibri, and Asma Barles, also revealed that the word *qawwāmūn* is functional and social. According to them, the role of men as protectors in this verse is associated with the husband's responsibility as a breadwinner. Therefore, if the husband is no longer able to earn a living, then *qawwāmūn* is lost on him.

The status of men and women according to Al-Hibri is equal based on Qs. Al-Taubah: 71. The argument is that men cannot have advantages, because women can also be said to be *auliya`* (protector, responsible, director). In line with Fazlur Rahman's thinking that the role and duties of a wife in the household can reduce the superiority of the husband, because as a human being the husband has no authority over his wife. Al-Hibri and Fazlur Rahman have the same view that religiously men and women have absolute equality. Furthermore, Fazlur Rahman relates male superiority here to other verses in the Qur'an that mention God-given superiority over some others in terms of welfare or power, or the superiority of some messengers over others. That is, these types of superiority are not inherent but functional.<sup>58</sup>

In line with Riffat Hasan's opinion, Khaled Abou El-Fadl said that the word *qawwāmūn* can be associated with the ability to earn income and earn a living. So, this is not always attached to a husband, sometimes women can also generate large financial income and be able to earn their living. Especially nowadays, the majority of women find it easier to earn money than men. Therefore, Khaled Abou El-Fadl agrees with Al-Hibri that male superiority will not arise if he is unable to provide for his wife.<sup>59</sup>

All the opinions of Muslim feminists above are supported by Syahrur's opinion that the word *qawwāmūn* does not concern a particular gender, but rather certain qualities found in men and women. Syahrur interprets the word *qawwāmūn* as guardian, or responsible. He does not understand the text *al-rijāl* and *al-nisa`* as biologically male and female (gender), but rather interpreted as people who have the potential and characteristics of men or women. Furthermore, he gives the view that the word *qawwāmūn* means responsibility or power and competence. Finally, Syahrur emphasizes that the meaning of *qawwāmūn* does not only apply to the domestic sphere (family) but also applies to all aspects of social society.<sup>60</sup>

All of Syahrur's views as a whole refer to surah al-Baqarah (2): 187, "They (your wives) are clothing (*libās*) for you and you are clothing for them". He argues that *libas* in the verse means symbiosis so that the relationships and patterns that are built are forms of gender equality and justice. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd makes a strong statement that if the Qur'an supports spiritual equality for all sexes, equality in performing obligations, equality in creation, and religious rights, then it does not allow any inequality in all aspects of social life. Thus, in modern society, a woman can potentially be considered a *qawwāmūn* (leader).<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Abdul Mustaqim, *Paradigma Tafsir Feminis: Studi Pemikiran Riffat Hasan Tentang Gender Dalam Islam* (Yogyakarta: Logung Pustaka, 2008), 113.

<sup>58</sup> Hilmi Ridho and Debi Fajrin Habibi, "Al-Turast Wa Al-Tajdid; Telaah Atas Pemikiran Hasan Hanafi Tentang Tradisi Dan Pembaharuan Ajaran Islam Di Era Digital," *Indonesian Journal of Cyber Education* 1, no. 1 (2023): 40–53.

<sup>59</sup> Arliana, "Humanisasi Perempuan Dalam Tafsir: Studi Pemikiran Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl," 31–32.

<sup>60</sup> Rohmatul Izad, "Pemikiran Hermeneutika Muhammad Syahrur Tentang Konsep Kesetaraan Gender Dalam Islam," *Dialogia* 16, no. 2 (2019): 167.

<sup>61</sup> Asep Saepullah, "Feminitas Dan Dekonstruksi Perempuan Dalam Islam: Studi Kasus Pemikiran Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *TAJID: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 19, no. 1 (2021): 76.

According to Nasaruddin Umar, in this verse, the word *al-rijāl* does not want to explain the male and female sexes alone but rather wants to mention the good people who will become residents of heaven or hell that come from the male and female sexes. So the word *qawwāmūn* can mean anything, either as a leader, enforcer, support, or judge. Therefore, the position of men and women is the same in the verse, no one is superior. If this understanding is instilled in one's mind, there will be no such thing as gender discrimination or inequality. In general, the issue of men as leaders of the family is a natural thing, because men are more powerful and firm in making decisions.<sup>62</sup>

Starting from the explanation above, if there is a woman who is more assertive and intellectually established and has a leadership spirit, then she should be the leader in the household. The word *qawwāmūn*, which is interpreted as a support or reinforcement for his wife, does not mean that a husband is a ruling figure who dominates over women in all aspects, but the husband must act as a support for his spouse. In addition, this verse was revealed not in the context of social life amid society. However, this verse was revealed in the context of households to regulate family matters. In the current context, especially in the era of globalization, this verse can be understood as a spirit or spirit for the good of life together, not a spirit to oppress women.

From the description above, it can be concluded that the contextualization of the interpretation of surah al-Nisa (4): 34 in this age is very different from the past. There are at least three keys in the contextual interpretation of the verse, namely: *al-rijāl*, *qawwāmūn*, and *al-nisā`*. The terms *al-rijāl* and *al-nisā`* in the verse do not mean biologically male and female, but rather the nature of men and women. Of course, this kind of interpretation is very different, so it can affect the contextualization of the verse itself in everyday life. Thus, the traits of strength, intelligence, skill, prowess, and other traits related to male nature are called masculine. While the nature of meekness, feeling, ignorance, late thinking, and so on related to the nature of women is called feminine. Therefore, the word *al-rijāl* can mean masculine, and *al-nisā`* means feminine, which can be masculine traits in women and feminine traits in men, as a trait that is built by the development of life.

## CONCLUSION

One of the factors that influence the perpetuation of gender inequality is the patriarchal culture that is deeply rooted in society. The foundation that is often used as an excuse is the word of Allah SWT surah al-Nisa` (4): 34 by applying textual interpretation. In contrast to the contextual interpretation of Muslim feminist leaders who offer a perspective that is more fair and relevant to the context of today. They emphasize that to understand the verse correctly, it is necessary to consider the historical, social, and cultural context at the time of the verse's revelation, as well as its relevance to current conditions. The terms' *al-rijāl* and *al-nisā`* in the verse do not mean biologically male and female, but rather the nature of men and women. The traits of strength, intelligence, skill, prowess, and other traits inherent to men are called masculine. While the nature of meekness, feeling, ignorance, late thinking, and so on associated with the nature of women is called feminine. Therefore, the word *al-rijāl* in the verse can be interpreted as masculine and *al-nisā`* as feminine, which can be masculine traits in women and feminine traits in men, as a trait that is built by the development of life. Through this contextual approach, the husband's authority in the family is no longer interpreted as oppressive domination, but rather as a responsibility to maintain and safeguard the welfare of the family, taking into account the principles of equality and justice between

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<sup>62</sup> Nasaruddin Umar, *Geliat Islam Di Negeri Non Muslim; Sebuah Catatan Perjalanan* (Tangerang Selatan: PT. Pustaka Alvabet, 2019), 94.

men and women. This opens space for a more inclusive and fair understanding of gender roles in Islam, which supports cooperation between husbands and wives in various aspects of family and social life.

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