

**EGALITARIANISM IN THE QUR'AN:  
DIALECTICS OF CONCEPT AND REALITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The issue of equity and equality between men and women is one of the most serious problems and challenges that Muslims have faced in the modern era. Islam and Muslims are not only challenged to prove that their doctrine, as mentioned in the Qur'an and Sunnah, shows that egalitarianism is their main value, but they also should prove it in real life. However, it must be demonstrated not only through normative means as mentioned in its doctrine or history, but also by answering many contemporary challenges to the concept of equality between men and women today. This article examines the concept of egalitarianism from an Islamic perspective as found in the Qur'an. By using library research methods, it examines the further meaning of egalitarianism from an Al-Qur'anic perspective.

**Keywords:** *Egalitarianism, Man, Woman, Al-Qur'an, Equality*

**ABSTRAK**

Masalah kesetaraan antara laki-laki dan perempuan merupakan salah satu masalah dan tantangan paling serius yang dihadapi umat Islam di era modern. Islam dan umat Islam tidak hanya ditantang untuk membuktikan doktrin mereka sebagaimana disebutkan dalam Al-Qur'an dan Sunnah, yaitu menunjukkan bahwa egalitarianisme adalah nilai utama mereka, tetapi mereka juga harus membuktikannya dalam kehidupan nyata. Hal itu harus ditunjukkan tidak hanya melalui cara-cara normatif sebagaimana disebutkan dalam doktrin atau sejarahnya, tetapi juga dengan menjawab berbagai tantangan kontemporer terhadap konsep kesetaraan antara laki-laki dan perempuan saat ini. Artikel ini mengkaji tentang konsep egalitarianisme dalam perspektif Islam sebagaimana yang terdapat dalam Al-Qur'an.

**Kata Kunci:** *Egalitarianisme, Lelaki, Perempuan, Al-Qur'an, Kesetaraan*

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**A. Introduction**

In practical and real life, demands for equality and gender equality between men and women are among the current problems that Muslims often encounter in this contemporary era, especially in terms of the interpretation of religious dogmas or the messages of the Prophet's hadith, which often place women as "second-class citizens" or "subalterns" in the life of Muslim society. To back up these allegations and accusations, some evidence from Quranic verse interpretations is frequently used to claim that Islamic teachings do not carry the principle of justice at all, let alone recognize the value of equality and equity between men and women. Furthermore, another issue, such as dividing inheritance, is frequently

perceived as being dominated by men rather than women. Hence, this has further fulfilled judgments and accusations of Islamic injustice. because it is considered a violation of men's and women's equality (egalitarianism). Like wise with a number of other allegations and accusations that are often suggested against Islam and Muslims, especially the bigger demand for an egalitarian relationship between men and women.

Various suspicions, accusations, or other prejudices are sometimes attempted to be confirmed in today's reality. So a number of empirical studies were held to corner Islam and its people by justifying that Islam pays less attention to the equal position between men and women, both in terms of the normativity of religious doctrine, as well as in empirical real life. The high number of complaints of domestic violence (KDRT) in parts of the country inhabited by the majority of Muslims no doubt seems to justify the accusation, where for a long time women have been placed as "second-class citizens" as well as complements under men, and does not at all imply an egalitarian and complementary position and condition between the two in the Muslim community.

Actually, if you notice further by observing and studying several verses of the Quran, both analytically (*tahlili*) and thematically (*mawdhu'i*), you will find that Islamic teachings put men and women in a balanced and complementary manner. This can be seen from several verses of the Qur'an that can be used as evidence, as mentioned in Surah at-Taubah verse 71, An-Nahl verse 97, and al-Hujurat verse 13. These verses explicitly mention qualitative equality between men and women. It's just that the issue of quantitative balance and equity remains to be criticized more often as an Islamic injustice, especially the verses of inheritance distribution in Surah an-Nisa verses 11, 12, and 176. These three verses explain in detail the portion of inheritance given to the heirs, both men and women.

Based on several verses of the Qur'an, religious doctrine clearly confirms qualitatively the existence of equality between men and women, in the form of equal opportunities in faith and righteous deeds, and the absence of differences between the two, except in the form of physical nature and equal opportunities to become the best servant of Allah on earth. As for the issue of quantitative inequality in the distribution of inheritance as mentioned in Surah An-Nisa, it must be approached and understood more comprehensively, including an understanding of the aims and objectives of the enactment of such sharia law (*maqashid sharia*).

Based on the issues raised above, this article delves deeper into the meaning of equality (egalitarianism) between men and women. In the next section, we will use literature study as a way to learn more about the position of equality between men and women in Islam by looking at a number of verses from the Qur'an. This will help us get a full and balanced understanding of the issue.

## **B. Discussion**

### **1. Men and Women's Equality**

As of today's reality, most Muslim societies adhere to a patriarchal pattern in which men's power over women is often used as an excuse to lower and marginalize women's positions and roles and place them only in the domestic sector or at home. However, the long-standing patriarchal system has a significant impact on Muslim society's understanding

## Hamdiah Latif

### *Egalitarianism in the Qur'an: Dialectics of Concept and Reality*

of husband and wife roles, particularly their rights and obligations in the home. Islam as a religion of *syamil*, *kamil*, and *mutakamil* has laid down the principles of justice and the importance of *mu'asyarah bil ma'ruf* in husband-and-wife relationships, which is to strengthen and protect one another. Yet unfortunately, the ideal relationship in reality is not as ideal as what is outlined in the Qur'an. The role of women has often been used to justify women's domestic and home roles. Among the verses that are often quoted in this regard is QS. An-Nisa:

"O humanity! Be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it He created its mate, and through both He spread countless men and women. And remember Allah, in Whose name you appeal to one another, and respect family ties." Surely Allah is ever-watchful over you."

Based on the translation of the verse above, the word "nafs" (self) is widely understood by experts in Qur'an interpretation as "Adam" (referred to in Tafsir As-Suyuthi and Ibnu Katsir). This verse is frequently interpreted to mean that women were created from men. As a result, it is often used as a guide by the majority of scholars whose interpretations are deeply rooted and upheld throughout the history of Islamic civilization. This continues to be formed and passed down from time to time, from generation to generation.

Meanwhile, Q.S. An-Nisa: 34 is another verse that was frequently used as the understanding of the previous *mufassir* as an argument to place women in the domestic sector, where they do not have the right to be involved in public.

"The men are the maintainers (and protectors) of the women because Allah has made some of them excel the others and because they spend out of their property."

From the two verses above, it is explicitly mentioned that men's power over women is not only in terms of the household but also in all work sectors. Muslims, of course, firmly believe that the Qur'an was indeed revealed without the slightest doubt (*la raiba fihi*). The verses in the holy book should not cause doubt. However, the problem is the system of interpretation and meaning of the verse, which tends to be literal and ignores the principles and spirit of equality, equity, and egalitarianism in Islam between men and women, as mentioned in Surat At-Taubah verse 71; An-Nahl verse 97; and Al-Hujurat verse 13. These verses clearly and explicitly state the qualitative equality between men and women.

Hence, due to interpretations that often place the position of inequality between men and women, it is necessary to review them in order to capture the intent and spirit of Islamic egalitarianism as ordered in the Qur'an. The interpretation of the Qur'an must be seen by considering several aspects, such as customs (*'urf*), the reasons why the verses were revealed (*asbabun nuzul*), and the context of contemporary life. A Muslim scholar from India, Ali Asghar Engineer, once stated that to comprehend this verse, it should be understood as a description of the state of social structure and norms in society at that time and not a teaching norm.

Departing from the above reality, this is what then encourages some contemporary Muslim scholars, as shown by Fazlur Rahman from Pakistan, Mohammad Arkoun from Algeria, Mohammad Abid Al-Jabiri from Morocco, and so on, to carry out a kind of re-reading, contextualization, or even reconstruction of a developing understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an. After all, according to religious doctrine, the Qur'an is ideal as

a guide and guide for the lives of all humans. It is just that sometimes the broad, comprehensive, and universal meaning contained in the Qur'an is reduced by narrow interpretations and understandings represented by the particular culture and customs of the interpreter. Of course, the central theme carried by the Qur'an is certainly to realize justice, benefit, mercy, wisdom, and benefit, which is indeed the main purpose of enacting religious law, as written by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah in his monumental work, *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in 'an Rabb al-'Alamien*.

## **2. Dialectics Between Al-Qur'an Interpretation and Cultural Hegemony**

Based on the literal and ingrained understanding that women are often positioned as "second-class citizens" or "complements," such interpretations often impact men and women's relationships in today's real life. In fact, even though it is often seen as an apologetic attitude, it is certainly acceptable in general that Islamic teachings have a comprehensive and thorough perspective in terms of defining justice for men and women in a community. However, views of inequality between men and women are still being inherited, preserved, and maintained within the framework of today's Muslim society. This, as pointed out by Khaled Abou El-Fadl, a Kuwaiti Muslim historian who currently lives in America, emphasized that the understanding and interpretation of inequality between men and women from verses of the Qur'an became "mainstream interpretations." It will be considered the most legitimate authority in interpreting the Qur'an from now on.<sup>1</sup>

Khaled Abou El-Fadl's criticism from the UCLA campus is not out of line. Khaled spent a lot of time and thought carefully about the fatwa on women at a CRLO Fatwa Institute in Saudi Arabia, where many of the fatwas seem to be degrading, sexist, and even put women in a position that is not in line with what the Qur'an says. Even some of its fatwas tend to use a literal interpretation of a number of Prophet Muhammad SAW verses or hadiths to justify the institution's attitude and views on the fatwa issued. Whereas it is well known that interpretation has its own style and model in the "*Ulumul Qur'an*," including the use of *takwil* and *dhahir nash*. This is also true when it comes to comprehending the intent and purpose of sharia (*maqashid*), which carries the meaning and meaning of justice, equality, and benefit for all human beings, men and women.

However, in reality, this last model of interpretation (unequal) between men and women is increasingly attempting to be justified and strengthened in life for a variety of reasons: the limitations that women have as well as intellectual deficiencies (*naqishah 'aql wa al-din*, as stated in the Prophet's hadith); less reliable, due to poor memory in certain situations, which can be categorized as a form of psychological and sociological prejudice that is paternalistic. In fact, inequality is caused more by literal interpretations and the formation of local culture and customs.

To strengthen this view of inequality between men and women, the verse regarding recording debt (*muamalah*), as mentioned in Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 282, is often used as proof that even the Qur'an explicitly mentions an inequality of quantity where in matters of civil

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<sup>1</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name – Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (United Kingdom: Oneworld Oxford, 2003).

testimony (muamalah), it is required to present two men, or one man and two women. The translation of the verse is as below:

"O you who have believed, when you contract a debt for a specified term, write it down." And in justice, have a scribe write it between you. Let no scribe refuse to write it down as Allah has taught him. So let him write, and let the one who has the obligation dictate. And let him fear Allah, his Lord, and not leave anything out of it. But if the one who has the obligation is of limited understanding or weak or unable to dictate himself, then let his guardian dictate in the interest of justice. And bring two witnesses from among your men to testify. "And if there aren't two men available, then a man and two women from those you accept as witnesses—so that if one of the women makes a mistake, the other can correct her."

Based on the verse above, reasons that are often used as justification for women's testimony, which is considered weak, as contained in the verse, can be seen in the explicit emphasis on meaning to seek testimony from two women to replace the testimony of a man: "...if there are not two men (available), then a man and two women from those whom you accept as witnesses—so that if one of the women errs, then the other can remind... "

Examining a number of Al-Qur'an commentary books regarding the interpretation of the verse above, it is found that Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, a jurist and expert on ushul fiqh and mufassir, states in his book of commentaries that the different biological characteristics of women make them more inclined to forget (something) than men.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is determined by biological and physiological factors. Likewise, another interpreter, Imam Zamakhsyari, in his Great Work, Al-Kasyaf, writes in the same tone about the possibility of forgetting as a weakness in women, so that in this context, it requires two women: if one (woman) makes a mistake, then the other will certainly be able to remind her.<sup>3</sup>

In the works of modern interpreters of the Quran, the conclusions mentioned above are also stated in the same tone. For example, Sayyid Qutb, in his commentary work, Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an, points out that the requirement of two women necessitates inequality between men and women in quantity, as mentioned in the verse. It is due to women's psychological factors, mainly because of their maternal instincts, which prevent women from having the objectivity necessary to become witnesses, such as in the case of recording debts and other muamalah.<sup>4</sup>

However, different interpretations of this verse have been proposed by the modern Egyptian scholar Muhammad 'Abduh and his student Muhammad Rasyid Ridha, who reject the understanding and interpretation of the demands of the two female witnesses based on differences in nature and biological and physiological differences between men and women. In his masterpiece, Tafsir al-Manar, he wrote that, basically, both men and women have the same capacity to remember and forget. Nonetheless, because men and women play different economic roles in society, they are both prone to forgetting things that are not part of their daily lives (both male and female).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī, *Mafātihul Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Zamakhsyari, *Tafsīr Al-Kashshāf 'an Haqā'iq Tanzīl Wa 'Uyūn Al-Aqāwīl Fi Wujūh Al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār el-Ma'rifah, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Sayyid Quttub, *Fī Dhilāl Al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār el-Shurūq, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Rasyid Ridha, *Tafsīr Al-Manar* (Cairo: Dār el-Shurūq, 1367), pp. 122–23.

To strengthen Abduh's and Ridha's interpretation views above, in line with this, a well-known contemporary Muslim reformist scholar from Tunisia, Muhammad Al-Tahir Ibn 'Ashur, tries to analyze verses by using a tahlili methodology in ushul fiqh (principles of Islamic legal reasoning) to find the basis of the verse's ('illah) context. In this case, he concluded that the purpose of sharia (maqashid syariat) on the issue of two female witnesses is for the simplicity and convenience (tausi'ah) of mankind in terms of financial transactions that women involve. It is different from the pre-Islamic Arab tradition, which did not include women or had less involvement.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, even though a summary of the Qur'an interpretations that have been written, both from classical and modern times, tends to hold the view that the conditions and position between men and women are not equal, such as in the case of testimony, However, one cannot ignore the main principles of Islamic teachings, which imply that women are equal and are partners for men, as mentioned in Surat At-Taubah verse 71, An-Nahl verse 97, and Al-Hujurat verse 13. These verses explicitly mention qualitative equality between men and women. The unequal position above is exacerbated by the local historical and cultural heritage, which often violates and even distorts the noble position of women in Islam in terms of an equal position and equal opportunities with men. When it is examined further, there are also different views that have emerged recently that consider the unequal interpretation of testimonies between men and women due to the patriarchal cultural heritage that is passed down from generation to generation. In the end, it is accepted without reservation.<sup>7</sup>

This is debatable, because the way the position of women who are not equal to men is interpreted is more like a haphazard and biased view. In contrast, the interpretation that says men and women should have the same status and rights is more in line with the general goals and aims of Islamic law, which are made clear in many verses of the Qur'an, as was explained above. These two opposing viewpoints must be clearly confronted and argued in order to obtain and produce conclusions and a complete understanding of the equal and egalitarian position that the Qur'an actually promotes, as evidenced by many of its verses. Because after all, the Qur'an was indeed revealed to improve the condition of human life when it was revealed in the Arab Jahiliyyah society, which discriminated against the lives of women at that time, but the Qur'an also had a great purpose to engineer the social life of the community at that time and the generations afterwards in the future towards a better direction as aspired (social engineering) in the Qur'an.

Thus, this interpretation of inequality between men and women has been heavily criticized by contemporary intellectuals and other gender activists, such as Fatima Mernissi, a female scholar from Morocco. She observes that because the ulama (mostly men) face less criticism, they see Allah's revelation in the Qur'an as justifying and confirming their own misogyny. But if it is examined further, according to Mernissi, they actually fail to create "proper principles, laws, or axioms to distinguish structure from state of affairs."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Al-Thahir Ibn 'Ashūr, *Tafsīr Al-Tahrīr Wat Tanwīr* (Tunisia: Dār Tūnisiah lin Nasyr, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Hamdiah A.Latif, 'Kesaksian Dua Perempuan Dalam Al-Quran: Studi Komparatif Kitab Tafsir', *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Mu'ashirah*, 15.2 (2018), pp. 122–31, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jim.v15i2.5289>.

<sup>8</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1987).

### **C. Conclusion**

As was already said, equality between men and women is one of the biggest problems that Muslims face in the modern world today. Both Islam as a teaching and Muslims are not only challenged to prove that, in its doctrines and teachings, egalitarianism is its core value, but also to be capable of proving this in real life today. However, in turn, this requires valid evidence to not only go through the path of normative messages as implied in the doctrine and history, but also to be able to answer many contemporary challenges related to the concept of egalitarianism between men and women in real life in modern times.

This article is an academic discussion about what the Quran says about equality from the point of view of Muslims' ideal doctrine and their everyday lives. However, the Qur'anic principle, which states and implies equality, must be put forward in looking at the pattern of relationships between men and women.

Finally, this article concludes that, in terms of religious doctrine and normative, verses of the Qur'an or hadith of the Prophet Muhammad that discuss the position and position of women with the broad, comprehensive, and universal meaning they contain are sometimes reduced by narrow interpretations and understandings represented by certain cultures and customs of the interpreters, including patriarchal culture. This is where the spirit of re-reading, contextualization, or even reconstruction of a developing understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an, as shown by contemporary Muslim scholars, finds its justification and significance. Because after all, the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad serve as the main source of Islamic teachings (*mashadir al-ahkam*), which certainly carry the meaning and purpose of benefit and equality between men and women.

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