

**QUR'ANIC PERSPECTIVES ON *MUSTADH'AFIN*:
GENDERED OPPRESSION AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN
CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA**

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Abstract

This article investigates the forms of *mustadh'afin* (systemic oppression) experienced by women, as reflected in selected Qur'anic verses, and analyzes their relevance to the realities of contemporary Indonesian society. Filling a gap in previous scholarship, which often separates gender analysis from Qur'anic interpretation, this study adopts a gender-aware thematic approach (*tafsir maudhu'i*) and draws on both classical and contemporary exegesis, including *Al-Kassaf*, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, *Al-Maraghi*, and *Al-Misbah*. The analysis focuses on QS. An-Nisa [4]: 75, 97, 98; QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26; and QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5, all of which frame *mustadh'afin* as a condition produced by structural marginalization, limited access to rights, and deep-seated gender stereotypes. In present-day Indonesia, such patterns of *isti'dhaf* manifest through educational inequality, the dual burden of domestic and public responsibilities, victim blaming, and the commodification of women's bodies. The study proposes empowerment strategies based on Qur'anic principles, including spiritual and social *hijrah*, gender literacy, and inclusive reinterpretation of both texts and policy. By integrating gender-sensitive exegesis with the lived experiences of Indonesian women, this article offers a new framework for Qur'anic gender discourse and supports structural transformation rooted in Islamic justice.

Keywords: *Mustadh'af*, Women, Qur'an, Gender, Indonesia, Oppression, Empowerment

A. Introduction

The marginalization of women is not merely an abstract problem, but a lived reality shaped by the intersections of social, cultural, and economic structures. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity illustrates how femininity is routinely positioned in opposition to dominant masculinity, leading to women's subordination through cultural regulation, policy, and even academic legitimacy (Connell, 2005). This systemic dynamic extends beyond policy and ideology into the subtle messages embedded in media, where women are too often cast as weak or compliant. As demonstrated by Aini and Mayasari (2022), digital media frequently portrays women who are victims of sexual harassment as powerless, reinforcing a narrative of vulnerability and inferiority.

In contrast, the Qur'an addresses the plight of the *mustadh'afin*—those who are rendered powerless by both structural and cultural forces (Ariziq, 2022). The term *mustadh'afin*, unlike *du'afa*, is not limited to material deprivation, but refers to individuals or groups who are deliberately weakened by social systems, even when they possess the capacity to transcend such limitations (Rozi et al., 2024; Andrian & Majid, 2023). Verses such as QS. An-Nisa [4]:75 and QS. Al-Qashash [28]:5 are explicit in calling for the defense of the oppressed, embedding social justice at the heart of the Qur'anic message (Alwi et al., 2022a; Sholehah, 2018). In Indonesia, the resonance of *mustadh'afin* is felt both in the historical experience of colonialism and in today's structures, which still confine women to domestic spaces, limit their presence in the media, and restrict their participation in the economy.

While previous scholarship has approached these issues from multiple vantage points, including the social histories traced by Rozi et al. (2024) and the gender-sensitive reinterpretations offered by Amina Wadud (2021) and Barlas (2001), there remains a lack of integrative studies that combine thematic Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsir maudhu'i*) with gender analysis and the unique context of Indonesian media. This gap forms the basis of the present study, which seeks to provide a new reading of the *mustadh'afin* verses through a gender-aware lens, and to examine how contemporary patterns of oppression continue to echo the Qur'anic depiction of *isti'dhaf*.

By integrating scriptural analysis with the lived realities of Indonesian women—who face persistent barriers in education, media representation, and the double burden of domestic and public life—this research is structured around three central questions: How does the Qur'an represent the marginalization of women? In what ways are these patterns mirrored in the contemporary world, particularly through media? And what strategies, grounded in Qur'anic principles, can support the transformation of these social structures? Through this inquiry, the study aims to enrich the discourse on gender justice in Qur'anic interpretation and to contribute to the ongoing project of social transformation rooted in a contextual and progressive engagement with scripture.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing descriptive-analytical library research as its primary method. The central aim is to explore and interpret the concept of

mustadh'afin in the Qur'an as it relates to women, and to trace its relevance to contemporary gender disparities. The analysis centers on five selected verses: QS. An-Nisa [4]: 75, 97, 98; QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26; and QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5. These verses were chosen purposively for their theological and historical significance, as each explicitly references *mustadh'afin* in the context of social and structural oppression, including that directed toward women.

The research draws on a thematic interpretive approach (*tafsir maudhu'i*), using major classical exegetical works such as Al-Kassaf (Az-Zamakhshari) and Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-'Adzim (Ibn Kathir), as well as contemporary tafsir, including Tafsir Al-Maraghi and Al-Misbah (M. Quraish Shihab). The selection of these texts reflects a desire to represent diverse exegetical methodologies and perspectives, ensuring both historical depth and sociological relevance. In addition, secondary data—including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and recent gender studies research—are utilized to strengthen the analysis and situate it within current academic debates.

Data analysis follows a content analysis procedure, which involves identifying key themes within each verse, coding meanings from a range of tafsir sources, and triangulating classical and modern interpretations to avoid the pitfalls of a single, uncritical reading. Validation is achieved by comparing exegetical findings with the social and cultural realities of Indonesian women today, with a particular focus on issues such as educational access, media exploitation, and the dual burden of domestic and public work. This research is limited by its exclusive reliance on literature and the absence of empirical fieldwork. Additionally, the thematic approach may obscure the chronological order of the verses if not supported by contextual analysis. Nevertheless, this method remains valuable for conceptual investigations of *mustadh'afin* from the perspective of Qur'anic gender justice (Ibrahim, 2020).

C. Result and Discussion

1. Theoretical Perspectives and Analytical Framework

Examination of the terms *mustadh'afin* and *dho'fun* in classical Arabic literature shows that both share roots indicating a condition of weakness (Alwi et al., 2022b). In *Lisanul 'Arab*, *dho'fun* (الضعف) is described as the opposite of strength (*quwwah*), referring to physical or intellectual weakness depending on its vocalization (*dammah* or

fathah). Meanwhile, *mustadh'afin* comes from the verb *istadh'afa*, which means “to render someone weak” or “to oppress.” This term conveys not only individual frailty but also social and structural subjugation, reflecting the existence of power that deliberately weakens others. In *Tāj al-'Arūs*, Al-Zubaidi further clarifies that *mustadh'afin* are those placed in a vulnerable position due to poverty, powerlessness, or an oppressive system (Al-Zubaydī, 1984).

Table 1. Lexical and Technical Definitions of *mustadh'afin* and *dho'fun* (Lisanul 'Arab)

Term	Arabic Script	Lexical Meaning	Technical Definition
<i>Dho'fun</i>	الضَّعْفُ / الضُّعْفُ	Opposite of strength; physical (ḍammah) or mental (fathah) weakness	Human beings are inherently weak in both body and spirit
<i>Mustadh'afin</i>	مُسْتَضْعَفِينَ	Those who are rendered weak or oppressed	Groups or individuals treated unjustly, made weak, oppressed, and in need of <i>syar'i</i> protection

Further, *Tāj al-'Arūs min Jawāhir al-Qāmūs* explains that *dho'fun* means weakness, which is the antonym of strength (*quwwah*). This is emphasized in the statement:

الضَّعْفُ بِالْفَتْحِ وَيُضَمُّ وَهُمَا لَفْتَانِ وَالضَّمُّ أَقْوَى ... وَمَعْنَى الْكُلِّ: ضِدُّ الْقُوَّةِ

"*Dho'fun* can be read with fathah or ḍammah, both are valid, though linguists differentiate the dialects; its meaning: *dho'fun* is the opposite of *quwwah*" (Az-Zubaidi, 1990).

This weakness is not limited to the physical (*dha'fu al-badan*) but also refers to intellectual, opinion, and willpower weakness (*dha'fu al-ra'yi*). In the Qur'an, this appears, for example, in QS. Ar-Rum:54, which describes humans' progression from weakness to strength and then to weakness again in old age.

Furthermore, *Tāj al-'Arūs* emphasizes the derivative meaning of *dho'fun* in relation to *mustadh'afin* (المستضعفين). In technical terms, *mustadh'af* is the passive form, meaning someone who is deliberately rendered weak by others. This is illustrated in the phrase:

تَضَعَّفَتْهُ وَاسْتَضَعَّفَتْهُ بِمَعْنَى الَّذِي يَتَضَعَّفُ النَّاسُ وَيَتَجَبَّرُونَ عَلَيْهِ فِي الدُّنْيَا لِلْفَقْرِ وَرِثَاةِ الْحَالِ
"Mustadh'af is one who is socially placed in a weak position, at risk of being oppressed due to poverty or low status" (Az-Zubaidi, 1990).

Within the Qur'an, *mustadh'afin* refers to groups who are wronged and in need of protection, as illustrated in QS. An-Nisa [4]:98:

إِلَّا الْمُسْتَضْعَفِينَ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ وَالنِّسَاءِ وَالْوِلْدَانِ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ حِيلَةً وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ سَبِيلًا
"Except for those (oppressed) men, women, and children, who cannot devise a plan nor are they able to find a way (to escape)" QS. An-Nisa [4]:98.

Thus, while *dho'fun* signifies a general state of weakness, *mustadh'afin* identifies individuals or groups who are intentionally weakened and made objects of defense in Islamic teaching.

Table 2. Lexical and Technical Definitions of *mustadh'afin* and *dho'fun* (Tāj al-'Arūs)

Term	Lexical Meaning	Technical Meaning	Arabic Quotation
<i>Dho'fun</i>	Antonym of strength (<i>quwwah</i>); physical, mental, or intellectual weakness	Human phases of weakness throughout life; bodily or mental weakness	الضَّعْفُ ... ضِدُّ الْقُوَّةِ يُسْتَعْمَلَانِ مَعًا فِي ضَعْفِ الْبَدَنِ وَضَعْفِ الرَّأْيِ
<i>Mustadh'af</i>	Those rendered weak; oppressed or degraded by others	Individuals/groups structurally oppressed, requiring protection	تَضَعَّفَتْهُ وَاسْتَضَعَّفَتْهُ بِمَعْنَى الَّذِي يَتَضَعَّفُ النَّاسُ.....

However, a lexical reading alone is insufficient without engaging with modern social theory and contemporary Islamic gender critique. Amina Wadud (2021) and Asma Barlas (2001) argue that much of classical Qur'anic exegesis arose within patriarchal frameworks and needs to be reconstructed so that both men and women are treated equally before God. They reject interpretations that reduce women to objects of weakness, and insist on a tawhidi approach—rooted in the unity of God and social justice (Abha, 2014). *Musawah*, for example, encourages re-reading Islamic texts through the lens of women's experiences and challenges oppressive family laws justified by religious authority (Ahmad, 2022).

Islamic feminist critique further points out that oppression of women in Muslim contexts is often perpetuated not by the sacred texts themselves, but by culturally biased interpretations. Therefore, in discussing *mustadh'afin*, it is crucial to recognize that women's vulnerability is produced not only by physical limitations but also by systemic power relations. Contemporary exegesis must include an awareness of power dynamics and the ways texts have been mobilized to either reinforce or challenge patriarchal

structures. Hence, by integrating lexical study and progressive Islamic gender theory, this research treats *mustadh'afin* not as a passive status, but as a framework for resistance against injustice. This strengthens the relevance of *mustadh'afin* verses for the liberation of women from marginalization and opens a space for fair and contextual reinterpretation of sacred texts.

2. Forms of *Mustadh'afin* Against Women in the Qur'an

The concept of *mustadh'afin* (the oppressed) in the Qur'an is most evident in verses such as QS. An-Nisa [4]: 75, 97, 98; QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26; and QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5, each of which presents a nuanced portrait of marginalization that transcends simple physical or economic weakness. These verses collectively highlight how oppression is not a matter of individual failing, but a condition rooted in social and structural dynamics—precisely the reality experienced by many women, both in the early Islamic context and today.

QS. An-Nisa [4]: 75 illustrates the plight of those unable to migrate or defend their rights, focusing not only on men but also on women and children rendered powerless by circumstance. Classical commentators such as *Ibn Kathir* and *Az-Zamakhshari* understood this as a reference to the physical and political constraints faced by early Muslim women in Mecca, who were systematically denied agency and protection (Az-Zamakhshari, 1998; Ibn Kathir, 1997). Contemporary scholars, however, have expanded this reading to view these verses as a broader call for transformation—urging not only compassion but active resistance against systems that perpetuate female vulnerability (Wadud, 2021; Alamsyah & Lintang, 2025).

QS. An-Nisa [4]: 97–98 moves beyond individual circumstances to criticize passive acceptance of oppression. Here, *mustadh'afin* are depicted as those whose inability to resist is shaped by wider social and economic structures. For women, this can mean lack of access to education, exclusion from public life, or dependency resulting from unequal economic arrangements. Rather than assigning blame to the oppressed, the verses recognize how social systems can restrict agency—a view that resonates deeply with gender-aware interpretations and remains relevant in the context of persistent gender inequality in Indonesia.

QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26 further reinforces the theme of collective powerlessness, especially as it affects marginalized groups. In the context of women, this verse has been interpreted to refer to the ways in which women's voices are systematically diminished, both in the family and the public sphere. Restrictions on political participation, economic independence, and even freedom of expression continue to position women as objects rather than agents, mirroring the marginalization addressed in the Qur'an.

QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5 presents a historical case of systemic oppression under Pharaoh, whose policies deliberately weakened and exploited Bani Israil, including their women. While traditional exegesis often focuses on political subjugation, feminist readings highlight the targeting of women's bodies and reproductive capacities as instruments of control—an issue that remains painfully relevant wherever women are subjected to violence, exploitation, or are denied autonomy over their own lives (Shihab, 2002; Mernissi, 1982).

Table 3. Comparative Exegesis of Verses on *mustadh'afin*

Verse	Classical Exegesis (<i>Al-Kassaf/Ibn Kathir</i>)	Modern Exegesis (<i>Q. Shihab</i>)	Progressive Reading (<i>Wadud/Barlas</i>)	Contemporary Relevance (Indonesia)
QS 4:75	Women as objects of Quraysh oppression	Women collectively marginalized	Spiritual call for <i>hijrah</i> and empowerment	Limited protection for victims of religious violence
QS 4:97–98	<i>Mustadh'af</i> those unable to migrate	Socially determined incapacity	Structural oppression, dependency	Low participation in family and community decisions
QS 8:26	Muslim minority's weakness	Reliance on external aid	Collective disempowerment under patriarchy	Exclusion from public roles, unequal domestic burdens
QS 28:4	Pharaoh's political exploitation	Symbolic oppression of Bani Israil	Control over women's bodies, reproductive injustice	Normalization of harassment in politics and media
QS 28:5	Divine promise to the oppressed	Structural liberation from tyranny	Legitimizing women's leadership	The need for affirmative action and gender policies

The experiences described in these verses are echoed in real-world situations, such as the ongoing struggles faced by female workers in Indonesia's textile industry, where dependence on male supervisors, fear of victim blaming, and the normalization of harassment keep many women silent despite legal protections. This demonstrates that the Qur'an's concept of *mustadh'afin* is not limited to the past, but directly addresses the challenges women continue to face in breaking cycles of marginalization.

Thus, a reading of these verses through both classical and contemporary perspectives demonstrates that the Qur'an's concern for the oppressed extends beyond physical hardship to encompass the social, political, and cultural systems that maintain gender inequality. Reinterpreting *mustadh'afin* in this way aligns with the broader aim of this study: to provide a framework for gender justice that is both rooted in scriptural authority and responsive to contemporary realities.

3. Relevance of *Mustadh'af* to Contemporary Women's Issues

The interpretation of *mustadh'afin* in the Qur'an, as reflected in verses such as QS. An-Nisa [4]: 75, 97, 98; QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26; and QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5, underscores the persistent and systemic nature of women's oppression, a reality that remains deeply relevant today. While classical exegesis often focused on the historical context of these verses, contemporary readings draw direct connections to the social structures that continue to limit women's participation and rights.

For instance, QS. An-Nisa [4]: 97–98, which describes those unable to undertake hijrah, can be understood as capturing the entrapment women experience within restrictive social systems. This is not a reflection of individual weakness, but rather of structural conditions: economic dependency, lack of gender literacy, and insufficient institutional support all serve to curtail women's agency (Mitra et al., 2015). In Indonesia, reports by *Komnas Perempuan* have documented hundreds of thousands of cases of violence against women, with underreporting fueled by social stigma and victim blaming—a phenomenon that strongly echoes the warnings found in the Qur'anic text.

QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26, which highlights the collective vulnerability of the early Muslim community, is mirrored in the challenges faced by women working in the informal sector today. Studies by the International Labour Organization show that most women in these roles encounter discrimination in wages, disproportionate workloads, and

limited maternity protection (ILO Homepage | International Labour Organization, n.d.). These patterns of economic and institutional disempowerment reinforce the condition of *isti'dhaf* described in the Qur'an, making the text's call for justice profoundly relevant in the modern context (Saiful et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5 speaks to the use of political and biological control over women under repressive regimes. As interpreted by scholars like Quraish Shihab and Fatima Mernissi, these verses point not only to overt acts of oppression but also to the subtle ways in which women's bodies and roles are regulated for the benefit of those in power (Shihab, 2002; Mernissi, 1982). This is painfully evident in Indonesia's academic and professional settings, where cases of harassment and institutional neglect persist despite legal safeguards (Komnas Perempuan, 2024).

Importantly, the Qur'an's promise to raise up the *mustadh'afin*—to make them leaders and inheritors—serves as a powerful theological mandate for women's empowerment and the pursuit of justice-based reforms. This notion of transformative social change has practical implications for gender policy: it provides religious legitimacy for efforts to increase women's representation in public and political spheres, to mainstream gender literacy, and to implement affirmative action in both law and practice (Gupta et al., 2019).

In this way, the Qur'an's vision of justice for the *mustadh'afin* is not only a matter of historical exegesis, but an active framework for confronting gender-based oppression and inspiring collective transformation in Indonesia today. By integrating scriptural values, sociological analysis, and contemporary advocacy, this study underscores the enduring relevance of the *mustadh'afin* narrative as both ethical imperative and strategic resource for women's liberation.

4. Empowerment Strategies for Women Facing Forms of *Mustadh'af* in the Contemporary Era

Building on both Qur'anic interpretation and current social realities, effective empowerment strategies for women must focus on dismantling the structural, systemic, and cultural underpinnings of *isti'dhaf*. The verses QS. An-Nisa [4]: 75, QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26, and QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5 serve as both normative and strategic foundations for concrete interventions that can move women from positions of marginalization to active participation.

First, transformation begins with the cultivation of critical consciousness, or *hijrah*—not only spiritual, but also social. Drawing on QS. An-Nisa [4]: 97–98, this approach can be realized through integrating gender literacy into Islamic religious education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*) curricula, particularly in *madrasah* and *pesantren*. Gender-responsive tafsir training, as suggested by Ni'mah and colleagues, can be developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and major Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (Ni'mah et al., 2024). In this context, teachers, female preachers (*ustadzah*), and religious educators (*da'i*) play vital roles as change agents, shaping more equitable interpretations of sacred texts.

Second, economic empowerment is essential, as underscored by QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26. Here, multi-stakeholder collaboration—between local government and women's organizations—is crucial for building community-based entrepreneurship training and practical skills development. Models such as *da'wah bil hal*, as practiced by Aisyiyah, have proven effective in elevating women's economic standing and promoting financial independence, which is critical to resisting dependence and domestic violence (Rochmah & Nurhalizah, 2024).

Third, to address the symbolic and structural control over women's bodies and public spaces highlighted in QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4, it is necessary to establish safe, supportive environments across mosques, campuses, and community centers. These safe spaces should offer legal and psychosocial support, as well as anti-victim blaming education (Hamid, 2021). Active engagement of institutions such as *Komnas Perempuan*, LPSK, and advocacy organizations like LBH APIK is essential for providing comprehensive protection and support (Kanya Eka Santi, 2024).

Fourth, the promise in QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 5—elevating the *mustadh'afin* to positions of leadership—should be operationalized through policies that affirm women's representation in strategic decision-making roles. Practical steps include affirmative action in appointing women to leadership positions in village government, religious organizations, and community councils. Internal policy reforms within Islamic organizations to support inclusive leadership are equally important, with progress measured by women's participation in both decision-making structures and policy development (Munir et al., 2024).

While these empowerment strategies face barriers such as patriarchal resistance, limited funding, and conservative interpretations of religion, they are also supported by expanding networks, the use of digital technology for education and advocacy, and the mainstreaming of *maqashid syariah* principles that emphasize justice and the protection of rights (Abdelgafar, 2024). As Amina Wadud notes, empowering women is not only a spiritual obligation but a form of practical *jihad*—anchored in text, context, and collective action (Wadud, 2021). Ultimately, the integration of normative Qur’anic guidance with practical, context-based interventions can produce sustainable, justice-oriented social change. By engaging state institutions, civil society, educational communities, and families, empowerment rooted in Qur’anic values has the potential to transform not only the status of women but the broader fabric of society.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Qur’anic concept of *mustadh’af*, as articulated in QS. An-Nisa [4]: 75, 97, 98; QS. Al-Anfal [8]: 26; and QS. Al-Qashash [28]: 4–5, extends far beyond the notion of physical or economic weakness to encompass multidimensional and systemic forms of oppression affecting women. The analysis of classical and contemporary exegesis reveals that *mustadh’af* is not merely a label for the vulnerable, but a reflection of deliberate social structures and cultural practices that limit women’s agency and participation. In the context of contemporary Indonesia, these patterns are evident in persistent educational disparities, dual burdens of domestic and public roles, symbolic and material exploitation, and the continued silencing of women’s voices.

Through a gender-aware thematic interpretation, this article bridges Qur’anic text and lived reality, providing a nuanced understanding of how the legacy of *isti’dhaf* endures in new forms. By integrating progressive hermeneutics with empirical data, the findings highlight the importance of contextual and inclusive readings of scripture that recognize the active role of women not only as recipients of justice but as agents of transformation. The empowerment strategies formulated in this study, ranging from critical gender literacy and economic capacity-building to the creation of safe spaces and the promotion of women’s leadership, are grounded in Qur’anic imperatives for justice and the dignity of all human beings. These approaches underscore that liberation, as

envisioned in the Qur'an, requires both spiritual and structural change, and must be anchored in collective commitment and institutional reform.

The principal contribution of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, uniting tafsir, social theory, and empirical evidence to enrich Islamic gender discourse and inform public policy. This study not only offers new perspectives for advancing gender justice within Islamic scholarship but also provides actionable recommendations for religious, educational, and policy institutions dedicated to protecting and empowering women. Future research should further explore interdisciplinary and community-based models of Qur'anic interpretation and empowerment, ensuring that the transformative potential of *mustadh'afin* remains a living resource for justice, equality, and social renewal.

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