

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i6.2501>

Defending Women’s Right to Leadership in Islam: The Reconstruction of Mainstream Gender-Biased Qur’anic Exegesis of Leadership Verse

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Abstract

Up to the present day, women still faced several rejection to hold leadership position in Islamic community. The rejection of women’s leadership stems from interpretations of Qur’anic verse Q.S. Al-Nisā’ (4): 34. Through this verse, majority of exegets came to conclude that women has no right of leadership upon men. This study aimed to reconstruct the scholarly interpretations of Q.S. Al-Nisā’ (4): 34 using qira’ah mubadalah and ma’na-cum-maghza approaches. This study employed a literature review method with prominent exegesis books as its primary sources. The findings of this study revealed that: (1) leadership in Islam is a shared responsibility between men and women; and (2) the rejection or prohibition of women’s leadership is inconsistent with the meaning of Q.S. Al-Nisā’ (4): 34, which in fact encourages all individuals, regardless of gender, to take protective and responsible roles as long as they have the capacity.

Keywords: *Ma’na-Cum-Maghza, Qira’ah Mubadalah, Exegesis Reconstruction, Women’s Leadership, Women’s Right.*

Introduction

Women’s leadership remains an unresolved issue in Islamic religious discourse to this day. For modern society, including the majority of Muslims, the right of women to hold leadership positions is no longer considered an issue (Yango, 2016, 17). Various countries, including Muslim-majority countries, have experienced the positive impact of women’s participation in leadership roles (Koburtay et al., 2023, 360). However, there are still groups within the Islamic community who view women’s leadership, particularly in politics, as something that violates religious law. One such example occurred during the 2024 regional election in Aceh (Indonesia), when a narrative spread claiming that women are forbidden (*ḥarām*) to become leaders, and those who support them are considered to be opposing *sharī’ah* (Widadio, 2024). A similar case took place during the 2018 regional election in West Java (Indonesia), when several groups formed an alliance and submitted letters of recommendation rejecting female leadership on the grounds that it contravened Islamic teachings (Ibrahim, 2017). A comparable issue also emerged within the Yogyakarta Palace (Indonesia), where certain royal family members rejected the

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king's daughter (his only child) as a successor, citing religious objections rooted in Islamic belief (Nugroho et al., 2021, 86).

Why does women's leadership remain a serious issue in some Islamic societies? This cannot be separated from the understanding passed down from generation to generation by scholars, which holds that leadership has been divinely ordained by Allah and His Messenger through the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* (the saying or deed of the Prophet Muhammad) (Osmani et al., 2020, 40). What is stated in the Qur'an is considered absolute law, and anything that contradicts it is seen as a violation of divine legislation. This view is also reinforced by fatwas from prominent Islamic scholars such as Bin Baz, who prohibited women from holding all central leadership positions such as judges, ministers, or heads of government (Hayati, 2016, 173).

The primary Qur'anic verse referenced in discussions about the right to leadership is Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34, which begins with the phrase, "Men are *qawwām* over women." The majority of Qur'anic interpreters (*mufasssīr*) understood this verse as a declaration from Allah that men are the leaders of women, not vice versa. This interpretation can be found throughout the classical to modern *tafsīr* (exegesis) literature. For instance, Ibn Kathīr explained in his commentary regarding this verse that "it means that men are leaders, rulers, and decision-makers over women" (Ibn Kathīr, 1990, 292) or Ibn al-'Uthaymin who stated in his commentary that "*qawwām*" is a hyperbolic pattern that means that men lead women in everything" (al-'Uthaymin, 2009, 288).

It has become a tradition in Islam that the opinions of scholars hold authority in determining legal decisions within society. Scholars are highly respected figures, regarded as the knowledge inheritors of the prophets, as often mentioned in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (al-Darīmiy, 2015, 160). It is therefore unsurprising that these scholars have played a central role in shaping Islamic law and dogma (Hamdeh, 2021, 10). Moreover, their interpretations are not confined to a single generation but are passed down and preserved by subsequent generations of scholars (Schmidtke, 2006, 96). As previously mentioned, the dominant interpretation of Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34 by classical scholars tends to favor men, rather than offering equal opportunities for both men and women. As a result, the belief that leadership is a specific right reserved for men has become the mainstream understanding among many Muslims.

In addition, historically, Muslims tend to consider women not qualified to be leaders (Jalajel, 2017, 1). This belief is reflected in the history of several Islamic dynasties since the Umayyad Dynasty (Marsham, 2021, 15), Abbasid Dynasty (El-Hibri, 2021, 287), to the Ottoman Dynasty (Shaw, 1976) which according to historical records did not have a single caliph from among women. Although there were one or two women who have led in the history of Islamic kingdoms such as Sitt Al-Mulk (Fatimid Dynasty) and Razia Sultana (Delhi Sultanate), their leadership was an anomaly and still faced challenges due to their gender (Abdi, 2024, 278).

Where did the understanding of *tafsīr* scholars originate? It is important to note that classical exegetes often exhibited an atomistic tendency in their approach to interpreting the Qur'an. That is, they focused on individual verses in isolation, without considering their connections to other verses. This tendency increases the risk of ideological and sectarian bias in interpretation (Mustaqim, 2010, 52). Furthermore, the majority of classical exegetes, whose works were later cited by both medieval and modern scholars, were adherents of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* approach. This school of thought in Islamic epistemology favors a textualist reading of religious texts. Followers of *ahl al-ḥadīth* tend to rely heavily on the literal wording of the Qur'an and hadith, often at the expense of contextual understanding (Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, 2001, 293).

An example of this textualism can be seen in interpretations of Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34, which are often accompanied by the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: “A people who entrust their affairs to a woman will not prosper” (al-Bukhāriy, 1993, 2600). This hadith appears in many *tafsīr* works as a reinforcement of the argument that women should not hold leadership positions. However, when examined within its historical and situational context, the meaning of this hadith does not align with its literal reading (Salaudeen & Dukawa, 2021, 16). In addition, the social context in which these scholars lived, marked by patriarchal norms, also played a role in shaping interpretations that are predominantly gender-biased (Salahuddin, 2022, 255).

Up to this point, we can conclude that even though certain interpretations have become mainstream, this does not mean they are beyond review. Classical scholars of *tafsīr* were not infallible figures, nor should their interpretations be considered beyond critique (Hamdeh, 2021, 10). Especially when their understanding does not reflect the universal principles upheld by the Qur'an. If the mindset of earlier scholars continues to be rigidly maintained in today's modern era, the Qur'an risks being reduced to merely a “Book of Law” rather than a “Moral Imperative” (Umar, 2021, 41). This concern has prompted some contemporary Muslim thinkers to reconstruct the interpretation of religious texts that have long been deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Muslim community.

Departing from this awareness, figures such as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, Muhammad Shahrur, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and others emerged. These modern Islamic thinkers sought to offer new alternatives in understanding religious teachings. They introduced significant ideas aimed at restoring the Qur'an to its intended function, as a source of guidance and mercy for humanity. One of the central claims made by these reformers is that the Qur'an never discriminates between men and women. Thus, the discriminatory treatment experienced by women throughout Islamic history stands in contradiction to the core teachings of the Qur'an (Maarif, 2015, 179). From the thoughts of these figures, new approaches to reading and interpreting religious texts, especially the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, began to develop.

Influenced by the breakthroughs of these Qur'anic exegesis reformers, two Indonesian scholars emerged who sought to integrate and simplify various approaches that had been previously introduced. These two figures are Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir with his *qira'ah mubadalah* approach and Sahiron Syamsuddin with his *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach. *Qira'ah mubadalah* is a method of reading the Qur'an or hadith that addresses the subject of the text as applying simultaneously to both men and women. According to this approach, even if the Qur'anic or hadith text explicitly addresses only one gender, either male or female, the message itself is intended for both (Kodir, 2019b). *Ma'na-cum-maghza* is an interpretive method that employs a hermeneutical approach, aiming to harmonize the historical context and the textual message. According to this approach, every Qur'anic verse carries a meaning that is closely linked to its historical context. Therefore, the content of the Qur'anic text must first be understood in relation to the context in which it was revealed, and then its meaning should be adapted to the contemporary context (Syamsuddin et al., 2020).

Finally, this study will interpret Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34, which is the main Qur'anic verse often referenced in discussions of gender-based leadership, using the *qira'ah mubadalah* and *ma'na-cum-maghza* approaches. *Qira'ah mubadalah* will be used to analyze the subject addressed by the verse, while *ma'na-cum-maghza* will be employed to uncover and connect the meaning of the verse within both its historical and contemporary contexts. Through the integration of these

two approaches, the researcher hopes to produce an interpretation that aligns more closely with both the spirit of the Qur'an and the demands of the present era.

Interpretation Trends throughout the History of Qur'anic Exegesis from the 1st Century AH to the Modern Era

As previously mentioned, the belief that women are unsuitable, or even forbidden, from becoming leaders in Islam is closely tied to scholars' interpretations of the leadership verse, Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34. To better understand how the mainstream view of male-exclusive leadership has been constructed, it is necessary to examine how Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34 has been interpreted across different periods in Islamic history. The following presents examples of *tafsīr* works from each century, starting from the early era of *tafsīr* codification to the contemporary period.

‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68 AH) stated in his commentary (al-Fayruzabādiy, 2009, 69):

Men are the leaders of women (i.e. given the authority to supervise women's behavior) because Allah has given some of them (i.e. men by giving excess of reason and in the distribution of spoils of war and inheritance) over others (i.e. women) and because they have provided for some of their wealth (i.e. by paying dowry or alimony to women).

Muqātil ibn Sulayman (d. 150 AH) stated in his commentary (ibn Sulayman, 2002, 370):

Men are leaders over women (meaning given authority over women) because Allah has given some of them more than others (it is because men have the advantage over women) and because they have provided for some of their wealth (meaning they have gained excess because they have paid dowries so that they have the authority to educate and guide women).

al-Ṭabariy (d. 310 AH) stated in his commentary (al-Ṭabariy, 2001, 687):

Men are the leaders of women (meaning men are the guardians of women, i.e. disciplining and guiding them in all things that Allah obliges) because Allah has given some of them more than others (meaning because Allah has given men more than their wives in terms of the obligation to pay dowries, provide for their wealth, and provide for their needs. That is the way Allah gives an advantage to men over women, therefore men become leaders over women, that is, as supervisors of all of Allah's obligations related to women).

Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandiy (d. 373 AH) stated in his commentary (al-Samarqandiy, 1993, pp. 299–300):

Men are leaders over women (meaning men are given authority in women's affairs and the authority to educate them) because Allah has placed some of them above others (that is because men have an advantage over their wives in terms of providing for and fulfilling all their rights. And also men have advantages in the form of intelligence and the ability to plan things, so men get the right to lead women because they have a level of intelligence that women do not have. And also in men there are physical advantages and characteristics that women do not have, because men are synonymous with hot and arid weather so that they make them strong and mighty, while women are synonymous with humidity and cold so that they make them weak and soft. Therefore Allah gives men the right of leadership over women) and because they have provided for part of their wealth (meaning men get an advantage over women because they have given their wealth for dowry and women's living expenses).

‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushairy (d. 465 AH) stated in his commentary (al-Qushayriy, n.d., 330):

Men are leaders over women because Allah has given some of them more than others and because they have provided for some of their wealth (i.e. men are special because they have power, therefore their burden of responsibility increases according to their strength. The strength in question is the strength of the heart, not the physical strength).

al-Zamakhshariy (d. 538 AH) stated in his commentary (al-Zamakhshariy, 1986, 505):

Men are leaders over women because Allah has given some of them more than others and because they have provided for some of their wealth (i.e. men lead women by ruling or forbidding, just as leaders lead their people. And they are called leaders because of it. The pronouns in the word “some of them” include men and women all of them. That is, they are superior because Allah has given advantage to some, i.e., men, over others, i.e., women.... And as for the advantages of men are intellect, constancy, stubbornness, strength, generally able to write, knighthood, archery, and among them there are those who are chosen to be prophets and scholars.....).

The interpretations above represent the views of scholars from each century, starting from the first Hijri century to the modern era. It is evident that there is a strong consistency among their interpretations that most scholars understand the term *qawwām* in Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34 as referring to men being given the authority to lead and supervise women to ensure their adherence to religious obligations. These interpretations reflect the dominant scholarly perspectives of their respective eras. This trend is further supported by the work of prominent scholars such as Ibn Kathīr, who interpreted *qawwām* as meaning that men are leaders, decision-makers, and those responsible for correcting women when they deviate. Ibn Kathīr also cited the hadith of the Prophet, “A people who entrust their affairs to a woman will not prosper,” and extended its application beyond state governance to include judicial and other leadership roles (Ibn Kathīr, 1990, 292). Similarly, al-Qurtūbiy interpreted Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34 as affirming that men are assigned the role of leading women by providing for them and overseeing their conduct. He explained that during the time of the verse’s revelation, societal leadership, including governance and participation in warfare, was predominantly held by men. Therefore, the verse was seen as a confirmation of the existing social structure (al-Qurtūbiy, 1964, 168). In the same vein, al-Baghawiy and Ibn Juzay al-Kalbiy interpreted the verse as indicating that men are divinely empowered to supervise women in order to maintain goodness, order, and discipline (al-Baghawiy, 1997, 207; al-Kalbiy, 1995, 190).

al-Shawkāniy and Şiddiq Hasan Khān also interpreted Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34 as emphasizing that men are leaders over women, in a manner analogous to how a head of state governs his people (al-Syawkāniy, 1993, 531; Khān, 1992, 105). Al-Shawkāniy explained that this verse serves as a response to a rhetorical question, implicitly posed: “How can a man be entitled to privileges not granted to women?”, a question which, according to him, is then answered by the verse as an affirmation of male authority over women (al-Syawkāniy, 1993, 190). Similarly, Ibn Juzay al-Kalbiy interpreted the verse as confirming that men are rulers over women (al-Kalbiy, 1995). Furthermore, Ibn al-‘Uthaymin elaborated that the term *qawwām* is a hyperbolic form of *qāim* (leader), indicating that male authority extends comprehensively over women, not only within the domestic sphere but in all aspects of life (al-‘Uthaymin, 2009, 288).

The aforementioned interpretations represent only a selection of exegetical opinions concerning the meaning of the phrase “men are *qawwām* over women” in Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34 in their respective *tafsīr*. Nearly all of the cited scholars concurred that this expression constitutes a divine declaration of the exclusive leadership of men over women. To justify this claim, these

scholars commonly refer to the succeeding portions of the verse “*bi mā faḍḍalallāhu*” and “*bi mā anfaḳū min amwālihim*” as theological and socio-economic bases for the privilege granted to men in leadership roles.

al-Ṭabariy interpreted that what is meant by “*bi mā faḍḍalallāhu*” is that men become leaders over women because Allah gives an advantage to men over women (al-Ṭabariy, 2001, 687). Ibn Kathīr interpreted that the meaning of this sentence is that men become leaders because men are nobler and better than women. Furthermore, Ibn Kathīr used this argument to explain why the task of being a prophet and leader of a great kingdom was given only to men. To support his interpretation, Ibn Kathīr included a hadith of the Prophet stating that it would be unfortunate for a people whose affairs were given to female leaders (Ibn Kathīr, 1990, 292).

al-Baghawiy interpreted the phrase as indicating that men are granted the privilege of leadership over women due to divinely endowed advantages, including superior intellect, religiosity, and physical strength (al-Baghawiy, 1997, 207). Ṣiddiq Hasan Khān offered a similar rationale, arguing that these attributes explain why, throughout Islamic history, roles such as prophets, caliphs, sultans, judges, imams, and military commanders have been predominantly occupied by men (Khān, 1992, 105). Likewise, al-Shawkāniy maintained that men are deemed worthy of leadership because Allah has favored them by appointing prophets, caliphs, and religious authorities exclusively from among men (al-Syawkāniy, 1993, 531).

Regarding the second reason, namely “*bi mā anfaḳū min amwālihim*”, Ibn Kathīr interpreted this phrase as indicating that men are granted the right to leadership because they are entrusted with the responsibility of spending their wealth on women, starting from the payment of the dowry to fulfilling all of women’s needs (Ibn Kathīr, 1990, 292). Additionally, al-Sa’diy explained that because men have expended their wealth for the benefit of women, they are thereby assigned the position of guardians or authorities over women, while women are seen as akin to dependents who are tasked with obeying the commands of their husbands and of Allah (al-Sa’diy, 2000, 177).

Abu Bakr al-Jazāiriyy interpreted that since men are responsible for paying dowries and fulfilling other financial obligations, whereas women are not, men are therefore entitled to leadership over women and are even permitted the right to administer mild corrective actions, such as harmless physical discipline, for the purpose of education (al-Jazāiriyy, 2003, 473). Ibn al-‘Uthaymin, on the other hand, explained that this responsibility of providing for women is assigned to men due to their perceived physical and mental strength, which makes them more capable of earning a living, whereas women are not seen as having this same capacity. Therefore, it is argued that men are more appropriate to lead women in all matters (al-‘Uthaymin, 2009, pp. 289–290).

Through Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34, all exegetes previously mentioned provided an answer to the question of who holds the right to leadership and on what grounds? They generally agree that leadership is granted to men based on two primary reasons. First, because Allah has bestowed upon men certain advantages that are not given to women. These include superiority in intellect, emotional stability, and resilience. Second, because men are assigned the responsibility of financial provision for women. This obligation is based on the notion that men possess stronger physical capacities and greater safety in engaging with the public sphere. Consequently, these same reasons are used to justify the assignment of leadership roles to men.

Although the background of the revelation of this verse is related to a domestic issue involving a companion and his wife, classical exegetes or interpreters have extended the scope of its

application to encompass all aspects of Muslim life. This extension is based on the interpretive principle of “*al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafdh la bi khusūṣ al-sabab*” which holds that the meaning of a Qur’anic verse is derived from the generality of its wording rather than the specificity of its occasion of revelation (ibn al-‘Alā,’ 2016, 239). As such, Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34 is not limited to domestic matters, but is understood to apply more broadly to leadership in general. This interpretation is further reinforced by the use of the word “*qawwām*” (a hyperbolic form of *qāim*) which is perceived to indicate a comprehensive and intensified form of authority or leadership.

Slightly different from the above interpreters, some other interpreters offer a somewhat more neutral explanation. These interpreters do not discredit women as some classical scholars do, but rather place them in their proper position. Although, in the end, their interpretation still tends to favor male leadership. For example, Quraish Shihab stated in his commentary that men and women both have their respective advantages. However, the strengths possessed by men are generally more aligned with the qualities required of a leader, while the strengths of women are more suited to the role of an educator (Shihab, 2021, 512).

Exegesis Reconstruction of Q.S. Al-Nisā’ (4): 34

Qira’ah Mubadalah

In addition to the classical scholars previously discussed, there are several contemporary scholars who offer alternative understandings of Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34. These scholars attempt to reconstruct long-established interpretations that have shaped public perceptions regarding the exclusive right of leadership assigned to men. Each scholar employs a distinct methodological approach to respond to interpretative trends that are often perceived as gender-biased.

One such alternative approach was proposed by Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir through what he termed *qira’ah mubadalah*. *Qira’ah mubadalah* is a method of reading the Qur’an that simultaneously addresses both men and women as the subjects or objects of a verse. This reading is inspired by the foundational principle that all relationships between men and women are reciprocal and based on mutual partnership. The ultimate aim of this approach is to align the interpretation of the Qur’an with the overarching vision of Islam as a mercy to all creation (*rahmatan li al-‘ālamīn*) (Kodir, 2019b, pp. 59–60). This approach asserts that when a verse explicitly addresses or refers to men, it is implicitly also addressing or referring to women, and vice versa. *Qira’ah mubadalah* is grounded in three primary premises: (1) Islam is a religion for both men and women, and thus its sacred texts inherently address both; (2) the relationship between men and women is fundamentally based on cooperation and mutual reciprocity, rather than hegemony or domination; and (3) the continuous possibility of reinterpretation of Islamic texts must be preserved to ensure that these first two principles are meaningfully actualized within contemporary contexts (Kodir, 2019b, pp. 196–197).

To operationalize *qira’ah mubadalah*, three methodological steps must be undertaken. First, one must identify the foundational principles of Islamic teachings as derived from universal Qur’anic texts, which will serve as the interpretive framework. Second, the exegete identifies the central message or main idea of the specific text under consideration. Third, this core message is then extended or applied to the gender not explicitly mentioned in the text, thereby ensuring an inclusive and reciprocal reading (Kodir, 2019a, pp. 64–67).

When reading Q.S. al-Nisā’ (4): 34 through *qira’ah mubadalah* approach, it is essential to first identify the universal principles of Islam and the core message embedded in the verse. The universal values reflected in this verse include the command for mutual care among Muslims as

emphasized in Q.S. al-Tawbah (9): 71, to help in kindness as emphasized in Q.S. al-Mā'idah (5): 2, and to help financially as emphasized in Q.S. al-Baqarah (2): 273 and Q.S. al-Tawbah (9): 60. The main idea of Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 centers on the moral responsibility of those endowed with surplus, whether in personal capacity or material wealth, to care for and support those who are less fortunate. Thus, based on the third step of *qira'ah mubadalah*, it can be concluded that both men and women are equally eligible to serve as *qawwām* (protectors or leaders) when they possess such advantages and are thus entrusted by Allah with the duty of responsibility and care.

Ma'na-Cum-Maghza

In relation to the historical context and the purpose of the verse, Sahiron Syamsuddin proposed an interpretive framework known as the *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach. This approach seeks to harmonize the historical context with the core message of the Qur'anic text. To apply this approach, one must consider three key dimensions: first, the *historical significance*, which refers to the meaning of the text within its original socio-historical context; second, the *historical-phenomenological significance*, which pertains to the intent or objective of the text as understood in its historical setting; and third, the *dynamic-phenomenal significance*, which involves reinterpreting the text's objective in light of contemporary contexts and challenges. This method allows for a more contextualized and evolving understanding of the Qur'an that remains faithful to its foundational principles while addressing modern realities (Syamsuddin et al., 2020, pp. 8–9).

To uncover both the *historical significance* and the *historical-phenomenological significance* of a verse, the interpreter must undertake a multi-layered process. First, this involves a linguistic analysis of the verse's vocabulary. Second, it requires a comparative examination of the terms used in the verse, either through intratextual analysis (comparing with other Qur'anic verses) or intertextual analysis (comparing with non-Qur'anic texts or literature). Third, attention must be given to the historical context, both on a macro level (the prevailing socio-cultural environment of the Arab society when the Qur'an was revealed) and a micro level (the specific occasion or cause of revelation). Fourth, the interpreter must determine the overarching purpose or message of the verse. To establish the *historical-phenomenological significance*, several additional steps are necessary. These include: (1) categorizing the verse according to its legal, ethical, or social function; (2) extending its historical message to align with contemporary realities; (3) uncovering any symbolic or metaphorical meanings embedded in the text; and (4) constructing multi-perspective interpretations that are both faithful to the original message and responsive to present-day needs (Syamsuddin et al., 2020, pp. 8–9).

When applying this framework to Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34, the initial step involves conducting a detailed semantic and contextual analysis of each significant word and phrase in the verse (Syamsuddin et al., 2020, pp. 9–16). The term *al-rijāl*, as noted by al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī is derived from the root word *rijl* or *rājil*, which literally means “one who walks on foot.” This root meaning is evident in the usage found in Q.S. al-Baqarah (2): 239, where the word *rijāl* is interpreted as referring to individuals who are walking. In the context of Arabic culture, particularly in pre-Islamic Arabia, the term *al-rijāl* became synonymous with “men” because men were typically the ones who left the home to fulfill external familial responsibilities. al-Aṣfahānī also explained that the term *rijāl* is intimately associated with characteristics traditionally attributed to masculinity. Consequently, women who display typically masculine traits are referred to using the term *rajlah*, which is the feminine form of *rajul* (al-Aṣfahānī, 1991, pp. 344–345). Ibn Manẓūr explained that *al-rijāl* is a male type as opposed to female. He

added that not all men are called *rijāl*, only those who have passed childhood are called *rijāl* (ibn Manzūr, 1993, 267).

The Qur'an uses the word *al-rijāl* not only with one fixed meaning. Sometimes, the Qur'an uses the word *al-rijāl* or *rajul* (the singular form of *rijāl*) to refer to men in terms of gender, as in Q.S. al-Baqarah (2): 228; or to both men and women, as in Q.S. al-Tawbah (9): 108; or to prophets, as in Q.S. al-Anbiyā' (21): 7; or to community leaders, as in Q.S. Yāsīn (36): 20. Based on this, it can be concluded that the word *al-rijāl* in the Qur'an does not merely refer to men based on biological gender, but rather to a social construct. In addition, the term *al-rijāl* is not only used for men but can also be applied to other subjects, including women. In fact, it is possible that some men may not be called *rijāl* if, from a gender perspective, they do not meet the qualities associated with *al-rijāl*. Looking at the context, the word *al-rijāl* in Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34 more likely refers to anyone who meets the qualifications to become a *qawwām*, regardless of gender.

Furthermore, the word *qawwām* is derived from the root *qāma-yaqūmu-qiyām* carries meanings such as standing, strengthening determination (as in Q.S. al-Kahfi (18): 14), guarding or maintaining (as in Q.S. Āli 'Imrān (3): 75), repairing, taking care of, halting, or remaining (as in Q.S. al-Baqarah (2): 20), and being just or balanced (as in Q.S. al-Furqān (25): 67) (ibn Manzūr, 1993, pp. 496–499). The word *qawwām* in Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 can therefore be interpreted to mean maintaining, managing, caring for, or repairing. This interpretation is adopted by several interpreters, such as al-Qurtūbiy and al-Sa'diy.

Furthermore, the word *al-nisā'* is the plural form of *mar'ah*, which means an adult woman. Similar to *al-rajul*, *al-nisā'* is more closely related to gender rather than sex. However, unlike *al-rajul*, the meaning of *al-nisā'* is generally confined to women, although not all women are necessarily referred to as *al-nisā'*. In the Qur'an, the word *al-nisā'* carries several meanings, such as referring to the female gender as in Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 3, or a wife as in Q.S. al-Baqarah (2): 222 (Umar, 2001, pp. 160–162).

Furthermore, the sentence *faḍḍalallāhu ba'dahum* can be translated as “Allah gives preference to some of them.” The word *faḍḍala*, which means to give excess or favor, is used to indicate that something is better than something else. However, being “better” in this context does not imply that the other is bad. For instance, Allah used the word *faḍḍala* in Q.S. al-Isrā' (17): 55 to state that some prophets were given advantages over others, this does not mean that the other prophets were not good. In relation to Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34, the word *faḍḍala* is used to indicate that *al-rijāl* (whether biological men or women) possess certain advantages, which make them responsible for the role of *qawwām*. After conducting a linguistic and intratextual analysis, it can be concluded that the meaning of Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 is that anyone who has an advantage is entrusted with the responsibility of being a protector or maintainer for others.

The next step of the *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach is to conduct a historical analysis related to Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34. In general, this verse was revealed in the Arabian Peninsula, where patriarchal culture was still deeply rooted. At that time, men dominated almost all aspects of life, while women's roles were highly restricted. It is important to note that Islam came with a mission of equality, as stated in Q.S. al-Hujurat (49): 13. Therefore, the spirit carried by Islam is spirit of transformation. However, the changes introduced by Islam were implemented gradually to avoid social upheaval. This can be seen in the gradual prohibition of alcoholic beverages (*khamr*) (Adiansyah & binti Yahya, 2023, 15). Initially, the Qur'an merely warned about the harm of alcohol in Q.S. al-Baqarah (2): 219, followed by a prohibition on drinking at specific times in Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 43, and finally a complete ban in Q.S. al-Māidah (5): 90–91. A similar pattern

applies to the entrenched patriarchal culture that predated Islam (Rasyidi & Azizi, 2024, 700). Islam sought to gradually diminish these practices in order to establish equality between men and women. This can be seen, for example, in the inheritance reform whereas previously women were denied inheritance rights, they were later granted specific shares as outlined in Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 11.

In micro context, Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 was revealed in relation to an incident involving a man during the time of Prophet Muhammad, who slapped his wife. The wife then complained to the Prophet, seeking justice through *qiṣāṣ* (an eye for an eye justice). Eventually, the Prophet Muhammad allowed her to carry out *qiṣāṣ*. However, shortly after the woman left the Prophet's presence, Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 was revealed, prompting the Prophet to call her back and say, "I want something, but Allah wants something else" (al-Suyūṭiy, 2003, 512).

So far, the analysis of *ma'na* (the meaning of the text and the significance of the text based on the historical context) shows that Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 purely intended to describe the social condition of the Arabs at that time, rather than to provide religious directives related to leadership. This verse should not be understood as a declaration of leadership for any specific gender. It explains that at the time this verse was revealed, men had greater roles and opportunities than women. This was because men, sociologically and anthropologically, acted as the driving force in society. Therefore, it is natural to say that they had an advantage over women, who, in the end, were given the responsibility to support them. In line with this, Aqil Siroj pointed out that if viewed from the context of the cause of the revelation, this verse was revealed to address domestic issues, making it inappropriate to extend its context to broader social life (Siroj, 2012, 243). Thus, through the *ma'na-cum-maghza* approach, it can be concluded that Q.S. Al-Nisā' (4): 34 does not prohibit women from becoming political leaders, as understood by the majority of commentators. On the contrary, this verse opens up the greatest opportunities for women who have the qualifications to become leaders in any field.

Conclusion

One of the contributions of renewal in the interpretation of the Qur'an is the presence of the methodology of *qira'ah mubadalah* and *ma'na-cum-maghza* which can be said to be a summary of the various thoughts of the figures who laid the foundation of contemporary interpretation. The presence of these two methodologies provides a new and more progressive perspective on the Qur'an. Thanks to these two approaches, Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 which has been used as a weapon to kill women's leadership rights can finally be interpreted in accordance with the true spirit of Islam. From *qira'ah mubadalah*, it is concluded that the task of leadership is the task of men and women together, not just one of them. From *ma'na-cum-maghza*, it is concluded that women's leadership should not be hindered, let alone forbidden, because women's leadership is in accordance with the universal message of the Qur'an. After applying these two approaches, Muslims can interpret Q.S. al-Nisā' (4): 34 as a declaration from Allah so that every Muslim men and women compete to improve themselves to be a protector for others.

The interpretation of contemporary scholars, who try to break through cultural barriers in interpretation in order to produce an objective interpretation, is a very important breakthrough for the life of Muslims. Thanks to the efforts made by them, the message of the Qur'an can finally be understood in line with the spirit of Islam itself. However, it should be noted that this is certainly not a reproach against classical scholars whose interpretation is still greatly influenced by their respective social conditions. It is also necessary to admit that we live in a time far different from those classical scholars so that what was interpreted by them may be

relevant to their time. And vice versa, what is interpreted by classical scholars should not be used as a basis, let alone a law, to assess the current situation and conditions. The text of the Qur'an is static but the context will continue to be dynamic so that the Qur'an is said to be "*ṣālih li kulli zamān wa makān*" which means relevant in every time and place.

Sponsorship

This research is fully funded by Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education Agency) of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia.

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