



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Gender Roles and Feminist Critiques in Islam: A Study of Qur'anic Verses Based on *Tafsir As-Sa'di*

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## Abstract

This study investigates how the Qur'an conceptualizes gender equality through the perspective of *Tafsir As-Sa'di*. The research addresses the problem of misinterpretations that portray Islam as patriarchal and aims to clarify the Qur'anic foundations of justice-based gender relations. Using a qualitative interpretative method, relevant verses such as QS Al-Hujurat 13, QS Al-Ahzab 35, QS An-Nahl 97, QS Al-Baqarah 228, and QS At-Tawbah 71 were analyzed alongside classical and contemporary scholarship. The findings show that the Qur'an establishes spiritual and moral equality between men and women, while distinguishing functional responsibilities based on justice rather than superiority. *Tafsir As-Sa'di* highlights collaboration between men and women in both family life and societal participation, refuting claims of inherent patriarchal bias. The study also identifies areas where Islamic teachings align with feminist concerns, particularly regarding education, protection, and dignity. This research contributes to a more objective and tafsir-based understanding of gender in Islam and provides a clearer framework for engaging with contemporary gender debates.

**Keywords:** Gender in Islam, *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, Feminism and Equality.

## Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji konsep kesetaraan gender dalam Islam melalui perspektif *Tafsir As-Sa'di*. Permasalahan utama yang diangkat adalah adanya kesalahpahaman yang menilai Islam sebagai agama patriarkal. Penelitian ini bertujuan menjelaskan dasar-dasar Qur'ani mengenai keadilan gender dan menegaskan bagaimana Islam membangun relasi laki-laki dan perempuan berdasarkan prinsip keseimbangan hak dan tanggung jawab. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi tafsir, penelitian ini menganalisis ayat-ayat seperti QS Al-Hujurat 13, QS Al-Ahzab 35, QS An-Nahl 97, QS Al-Baqarah 228, dan QS At-Taubah 71, disertai kajian literatur klasik dan kontemporer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Al-Qur'an menegaskan kesetaraan spiritual dan moral antara laki-laki dan perempuan, sementara perbedaan peran didasarkan pada keadilan, bukan superioritas. *Tafsir As-Sa'di* menekankan kemitraan laki-laki dan perempuan dalam kehidupan keluarga maupun sosial, sehingga menolak klaim bahwa Islam mendukung patriarki. Penelitian ini juga menemukan titik temu antara ajaran Islam dan nilai-nilai feminisme, khususnya terkait pendidikan, perlindungan, dan martabat perempuan. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada pemahaman yang lebih objektif dan berbasis tafsir mengenai gender dalam Islam serta kerangka yang lebih jelas dalam merespons isu-isu gender kontemporer.

**Kata kunci:** Gender dalam Islam, *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, Feminisme dan Kesetaraan

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## Introduction

Gender equality has become a global conversation in various fields, including religion (Glas et al., 2018). Within the field of religion, Islam is frequently placed at the center of feminist criticism, particularly regarding the position, rights, and social roles of women (Wood 2019). Feminist perspectives often argue that religious traditions, including Islam, contribute to the structural inequality between men and women. However, these accusations cannot be adequately addressed without careful examination of Islam's primary source, the Al-Qur'an, along with its authoritative interpretations (Udin & Asyasyra, 2024). In the Islamic intellectual tradition, debates on gender are closely connected to the process of Qur'anic interpretation. Differences in understanding gender relations in Islam are largely influenced by the interpretive frameworks employed by the exegetes. Therefore, connecting the global discourse on gender equality with Qur'anic exegesis is essential to determine whether claims of gender inequality originate from the Qur'an itself or from particular interpretive approaches shaped by historical and social contexts (Fitriyah & Rahman, 2024).

One important work of Qur'anic interpretation in this regard is *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, written by Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Nasir al-Sa'di, a twentieth-century Islamic scholar from *Najd*. This tafsir is widely used in contemporary Islamic studies because of its clear, concise, and systematic presentation of Qur'anic meanings. *Tafsir As-Sa'di* emphasizes moral values, legal principles, and social ethics derived directly from the Qur'an without extensive polemical or speculative discussions. This characteristic makes it particularly relevant for addressing modern issues, including questions related to gender and social justice (عباس, 2015)(الدبيخي, 2001). The significance of examining gender verses through *Tafsir As-Sa'di* lies in its interpretive orientation, which prioritizes justice, balance, and wisdom as core Qur'anic values. Through this approach, verses related to men and women are understood within an ethical framework that emphasizes responsibility, mutual rights, and social harmony, rather than hierarchical domination. Analyzing these verses can provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of how Islam conceptualizes gender equality and gender differentiation. This perspective is crucial in responding to feminist critiques that often rely on selective or decontextualized readings of Islamic texts (Ismail et al., 2024).

Understanding gender issues in Islam is often limited to biased interpretations and is not based on comprehensive interpretive studies (Ahmadi, 2006). Modern feminism tends to view Islamic teachings in a partial manner, giving rise to various misunderstandings. Therefore, this research aims to bridge this gap in understanding by analyzing the verses of the Al-Qur'an related to gender through *Tafsir As-Sa'di*. This approach is expected to provide a more objective understanding of women's position in Islam based

on authoritative sources. In addition, with the increasing debate regarding gender equality in Islam, this study can be a reference for academics, activists, and the general public in understanding the concept of gender in Islam more fairly and proportionally (Eger, 2020).

This research aims to analyze Al-Qur'an verses related to gender using *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, identify the concept of gender equality in Islam based on the understanding of this interpretation, and compare the Islamic understanding of gender with the concept of modern feminism to find common ground between the two. To achieve this goal, this research uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach to *Tafsir As-Sa'di* and other related sources. The analysis focuses on five main verses that discuss the concept of equality, social roles, and the rights and obligations of men and women in Islam. Several studies have discussed gender issues in Islam from various perspectives. Fatima Mernissi, in *Women and Islam*, argues that many classical interpretations of Islamic texts reflect patriarchal cultural contexts rather than normative Qur'anic teachings, leading to the perception that Islam oppresses women (Puspita, 2021). Similarly, Amina Wadud, in *Qur'an and Woman*, offers a feminist rereading of the Qur'an that emphasizes ethical equality and gender justice in Islamic sacred texts (Anggraini, 2022). In addition, Asma Barlas, in her work *Believing Women in Islam*, critiques patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an and highlights the importance of rereading the text based on its theological principles of justice and monotheism (Barlas, 2002). Saeed and scholars of contextual interpretation emphasize that gender-related verses should be understood within their socio-historical context to avoid rigid and literalist conclusions (Saeed, 2006). In the Indonesian context, Nasaruddin Umar discusses gender equality in Islam by analyzing key Qur'anic concepts such as justice, leadership, and social responsibility, arguing that inequality often stems from interpretive bias rather than the Qur'an itself (Umar, 1999).

Although these studies significantly contribute to the discourse on gender and Islam, most rely on feminist hermeneutics or contextual approaches that operate outside the framework of classical Qur'anic tafsir. Research that specifically examines gender-related verses in the Al-Qur'an using *Tafsir As-Sa'di* remains limited. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by offering an analysis grounded in a recognized Qur'anic commentary that emphasizes ethical balance, textual clarity and Qur'anic coherence.

This study is unique in several aspects. First, it focuses on *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, which has not been widely explored in gender studies. Second, it adopts a comparative perspective by examining the points of convergence and divergence between Islamic understandings of gender and modern feminist thought. Third, the analysis integrates textual interpretations with contemporary social contexts. Through this approach, this study aims to

contribute to a more balanced and academically grounded understanding of gender in Islam based on authoritative Islamic sources.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars have discussed the discourse on gender in Islam from various interpretive and methodological perspectives. Ginting et al. (2023) examined gender roles in Islam and argued that the Qur'an upholds justice and balance between men and women (Ginting et al., 2023). However, their study provides a general theological overview and does not analyze specific exegetical interpretations of gender-related verses. Likewise, Elatrash, Rahmawati, and Alhaq (2023) highlight women's participation in social and religious life but limit their analysis to thematic Qur'anic principles without engaging with classical tafsir. These works contribute to the understanding of gender in Islam; however, they do not address how individual mufasssir interpret key verses on gender (Elatrash et al., 2023).

Scholarship comparing Islamic gender concepts with Western feminist thought has gained traction. Gärtner (2021) discusses the tension between Islamic role balance and Western feminist ideals of absolute equality; however, the study does not provide a textual analysis of Qur'anic verses or classical interpretations (Gärtner, 2021). Similarly, Noor (2024) explores the approaches of Muslim feminist thinkers such as Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi, showing how their contextual hermeneutics diverge from classical tafsir traditions (Noor, 2024). However, Noor's work focuses on feminist methodologies rather than evaluating how classical scholars such as As-Sa'di articulate gender justice within their exegetical frameworks.

Other studies have investigated broader gender issues in Islamic law. For instance, Putra et al. (2023) argue that Islam offers solutions to gender inequality through its emphasis on justice rather than identical treatment (Putra et al., 2023). However, their research remains conceptual and does not engage with specific Qur'anic verses or their interpretations. Consequently, these studies overlook how tafsir literature can serve as a bridge between Islamic principles and contemporary gender debates.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, research specifically analyzing gender-related Qur'anic verses through *Tafsir As-Sa'di* is scarce. Previous studies tend to (1) focus on general theological themes, (2) emphasize feminist hermeneutics, or (3) discuss Islamic law in abstraction without exploring how individual exegetes interpret gender roles. This gap is significant because As-Sa'di offers a balanced, justice-oriented, and accessible interpretive framework that has not been fully utilized in gender studies (As-Sa'di, 2003). Therefore, this study advances prior research by providing a focused, verse-based analysis using *Tafsir As-Sa'di* and situating his interpretations within contemporary gender discourse. By critically engaging with both classical tafsir and modern feminist perspectives, this

study fills the gap left by previous works and demonstrates how As-Sa'di's exegetical approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender equality in Islam.

### **Method**

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a library-based research design (Creswell, 2014). The research subject of this study is the interpretation of gender-related verses in the Al-Qur'an as presented in *Tafsir As Sa'di* by Shaykh 'Abd al Rahman ibn Nasir al Sa'di. The research materials consist of Qur'anic verses concerning gender relations, equality, roles, and responsibilities, along with their explanations in *Tafsir As-Sa'di* as the primary source of data. Secondary materials included classical and contemporary tafsir works and scholarly publications discussing gender issues in Islam. The research instrument in this study is the researcher's analytical framework, guided by qualitative interpretive analysis and thematic categorization of relevant verses.

The research procedure involved identifying Qur'anic verses related to gender issues, collecting relevant interpretative data from *Tafsir As-Sa'di* and supporting literature, and organizing the data based on their thematic relevance. Data were collected through intensive document analysis and literature reviews. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive analytical method by examining the textual meaning of the verses, analyzing their interpretation in *Tafsir As Sa'di*, and assessing their relevance to the concept of gender in Islam. In addition, a comparative analytical approach was employed to relate the interpretive findings to contemporary feminist perspectives to identify points of convergence and divergence. To ensure the validity of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing interpretations from *Tafsir As-Sa'di* with other authoritative tafsir works and relevant academic studies. Through this methodological framework, this study aims to produce a comprehensive and academically grounded understanding of gender in Islam based on authoritative Qur'anic interpretation (Miles, M.B. & Huberman, 1994)

### **Result**

#### **Equality and Human Dignity in Qur'anic Teachings**

The analysis of QS Al-Hujurat 13 shows that the verse establishes equality among all human beings by affirming that men and women originate from a single ancestral pair. The verse rejects any form of superiority based on gender, ethnicity and lineage. *Tafsir As-Sa'di* explains that the verse aims to eliminate distinctions grounded in social status and emphasizes that the only measure of human dignity in the sight of Allah is piety (*taqwa*). This finding indicates that the Qur'an upholds spiritual and moral equality for both men and women without granting inherent privileges to either gender.



### **Equality in Reward and Moral Accountability**

The examination of QS Al-Ahzab 35 shows that men and women who believe and perform righteous deeds are promised equal rewards. According to *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, Allah grants forgiveness and spiritual rewards without differentiating between genders. Similarly, QS An-Nahl 97 confirms that anyone who performs righteous deeds with faith will receive a good life in this world and a greater reward in the hereafter. These findings demonstrate that the Qur'an links reward, accountability, and spiritual success to faith and moral conduct, rather than gender identity.

### **Functional Balance in Family Leadership**

The analysis of QS Al-Baqarah 228 and QS An-Nisa 34 shows that leadership in the household is framed as a functional responsibility of men. *Tafsir As-Sa'di* interprets leadership as a role associated with financial duty and the responsibility to protect rather than as a sign of male superiority. These verses present a balanced distribution of rights and responsibilities designed to ensure justice and mutual benefit within the family. The findings indicate that the Qur'an conceptualizes family leadership through the lens of responsibility and service rather than through domination.

### **Shared Public Responsibilities Between Men and Women**

The analysis of QS At-Tawbah: 71 shows that believing men and women are described as allies who support each other in fulfilling religious and social obligations. *Tafsir As-Sa'di* explains that both genders are equally responsible for promoting virtue, opposing wrongdoing, maintaining prayer, paying zakat, and obeying Allah and His Messenger (SAW). This finding demonstrates that men and women are given shared public responsibilities and encouraged to participate actively in communal life based on their faith and moral commitment.

### **Discussion**

#### **Equality and Human Dignity Between Men and Women**

Based on the findings of QS. Al-Hujurat: 13, *As-Sa'di* emphasizes that human worth is rooted in piety, not gender, lineage, or social class. His interpretation frames gender equality as spiritual equality, grounded in moral accountability. This aligns with the theological view that both genders share equal capacity to attain virtue and divine reward. In comparison, studies such as Putra et al. (2023) and Ginting et al. (2023) also highlight that Islamic ethics positions men and women as morally equal. However, these studies remain conceptual and do not analyze specific, exegetical sources. *As-Sa'di's Tafsir* provides a more concrete textual foundation by grounding equality in the verse's purpose of breaking tribal and gender hierarchy.

From a feminist theoretical standpoint, Amina Wadud argues that the Qur'an stresses equality through spiritual agency rather than biological sameness. However, feminist critiques often focus on structural inequality,

whereas As-Sa'di's framework is anchored primarily in divine accountability (*taklīf*). This distinction suggests that Islamic moral equality does not depend on identical roles but on equal moral responsibilities.

### **Equality in Reward and Accountability**

Findings from QS. Al-Ahzab: 35 and QS. An-Nahl: 97 demonstrates that men and women receive equal spiritual rewards and are evaluated by Allah based on faith and righteous deeds. As-Sa'di consistently viewed these verses as affirmations that both genders possess equal potential for spiritual excellence. These results support the findings of Iksan and Pratama (2021), who argued that the Qur'an does not privilege men over women spiritually. Feminist scholars such as Mernissi often claim that Islamic tradition has historically marginalized women's spiritual agency. However, As-Sa'di's interpretation contradicts patriarchal readings by explicitly stating that the reward is gender-neutral (Iksan & Pratama, 2021). This convergence between Islamic exegesis and feminist critique shows that both frameworks affirm women's full moral agency, differing only in foundational epistemology: feminists draw on humanist ethics, while As-Sa'di grounds gender equality in divine justice.

### **Functional Balance in Family Leadership**

The findings from QS. Al-Baqarah: 2:228 and QS. An-Nisa': 34 illustrate that As-Sa'di interprets leadership (*qiwāmah*) as a functional responsibility based on financial duties and protection, not superiority. This represents a moderate classical stance that avoids hierarchical interpretations. This interpretation differs from that of classical scholars such as Ibn Kathir, who frame *qiwāmah* in more hierarchical terms. Noor (2024) notes that feminist critiques view these verses as symbols of patriarchy, particularly regarding inheritance, marriage, and women's domestic roles. However, *Tafsir As-Sa'di's* provides a counter-reading: leadership is tied to burden (*taklīf*), not privilege (Noor, 2024). The discussion shows that Islamic gender roles emphasize reciprocity *and* responsibility, which partially aligns with feminist principles of fairness but diverges on the issue of identical role distribution. This indicates a potential conceptual overlap: both seek justice, but Islam frames justice according to functional duties, not an egalitarian structure.

### **Women's Social Participation and Public Agency**

The findings from QS. At-Tawbah: 71 demonstrates that both believing men and women are described as "allies" (*awliyā'*) in promoting virtue and preventing wrongdoing. *Tafsir As-Sa'di* this as evidence of shared public responsibility, rejecting the idea that women are confined to domesticity. This aligns with Alotaibi's (2021) research, who documented historical female scholars and community leaders. It also converges with feminist arguments advocating women's public engagement. However, feminist analyses often

view Islamic norms as restrictive because of modesty requirements. *As-Sa'di* reframes veiling not as a restriction but as protection and dignity (Alotaibi, 2021).

This comparison suggests that much of the perceived conflict between Islam and feminism stems from differences in interpreting the purpose of religious practices rather than the value of women's participation.

**Table 1.** *Tafsir As-Sa'di's* in Promoting Spiritual Equality and Moral Responsibility for Women

Theme	Findings <i>Tafsir As-Sa'di</i>	from Previous Studies	Feminist Theory	Discussion Insight
Equality	Men & women equal in dignity & piety	Ginting (2023) general theology	→ Wadud spiritual equality	→ Both affirm equality but differ in epistemology
Reward	Equal reward for righteous deeds	Iksan Pratama (2021)	& Feminists full agency	→ Islam offers gender-neutral moral accountability
Leadership	<i>Qiwāmah</i> responsibility, not superiority	= Classical tafsir hierarchy	Feminists → patriarchy critique	→ Islam's justice ≠ identical roles
Social roles	Women share public duties	Alotaibi (2021)	Feminists public agency	→ Both affirm participation but differ on modesty

Source: compiled by the author

The discussion shows that *Tafsir As-Sa'di's* consistently promote spiritual equality, shared moral responsibility, and a functional balance between men and women. While Islamic and feminist frameworks differ philosophically, they converge in affirming dignity, agency, and access to public and intellectual lives. This section fills a major research gap by integrating classical tafsir with modern gender theories in a structured, analytical and comparative manner.

## Conclusion

This study examined how Islamic teachings, from the perspective of *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, articulate gender equality and the distribution of rights and responsibilities between men and women. The findings demonstrate that the Qur'an establishes spiritual and moral equality through verses such as QS Al-Hujurat 13, QS Al-Ahzab 35, and QS An-Nahl 97, where dignity, reward, and



accountability are linked to piety rather than gender. The analysis also shows that leadership roles in the family, as described in QS Al-Baqarah 228 and QS An-Nisa 34, are framed as functional responsibilities grounded in justice rather than superiority. Furthermore, QS At-Tawbah 71 confirms that both men and women share public and social responsibilities in promoting virtue and preventing wrongdoings.

These findings directly address the research question regarding how Islam conceptualizes gender equality: the Qur'an presents a balanced and justice-oriented framework in which men and women complement each other within divinely guided roles. This study further clarifies misconceptions arising from feminist critiques by demonstrating that *Tafsir As-Sa'di* emphasizes women's rights, dignity, and active participation in both spiritual and social life. While certain feminist aims align with Islamic principles, the Qur'ānic perspective prioritizes moral order and responsibility over unrestricted equality.

This research contributes to the broader discourse by showing that Qur'anic gender teachings must be understood through authoritative *tafsir* to avoid reductive assumptions. Future studies could expand this exploration by comparing multiple tafsir works or examining the application of Qur'anic gender ethics in contemporary Muslim societies.

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### **Author Contribution Statement**

FA conceptualized the research idea, conducted the literature review, and analyzed Tafsir sources. FA also wrote the initial draft and refined the manuscript according to the feedback. All the authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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