

GENDER EQUALITY IN THE QUR'AN (A CRITICAL STUDY OF M. QURAISH SHIHAB'S INTERPRETATION IN TAFSIR AL MISBAH)

Nasution

Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah (STIT) Iqra' Kapuas Hulu, Indonesia

*Corresponding E-mail; nasutionanas.2025@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines gender equality within the family from the perspective of the Qur'an, focusing on a critical analysis of M. Quraish Shihab's interpretation in *Tafsir Al-Misbah*. The background to this research stems from differing interpretations of Qur'anic verses concerning relations between men and women, which in some cases have led to gender inequality within family life. This study aims to analyse the concept of gender equality in the Qur'an, examine Quraish Shihab's method of interpretation, and identify the implications of his thinking for Muslim family relations. This study employs a qualitative approach using library research. Data were collected through a review of the Qur'an, exegetical works, and relevant literature, and were subsequently analysed using descriptive-analytical methods and a critical approach. The findings indicate that, according to Quraish Shihab, the Qur'an affirms the equality of men and women in human, spiritual, and moral aspects. Any differences are understood as functional, not hierarchical. In his interpretation, Quraish Shihab employs a contextual, linguistic, and moderate approach, resulting in an understanding that emphasises the principles of justice, reciprocity (mubadalah), and partnership within the family.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Qur'anic Perspective; Al-Misbah Commentary

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender refers to the observable differences between men and women, derived from the Latin word 'genus', meaning type or kind. The concept of gender addressed in this study refers to the differences in roles, functions and responsibilities between women and men, which result from socio-cultural constructs and may evolve with the times. The concept of gender equality has been developed with reference to two fundamental instruments, namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings are born free and equal. Gender is an analytical framework used to establish an equal footing between men and women in order to realise a more egalitarian social order (social equality). Thus, gender can be categorised as an operational tool for measuring issues concerning men and women, particularly those related to the division of roles, functions and responsibilities, whether in education or in the social life constructed by society itself.

Differences in the roles, functions and responsibilities of men and women in a social context are, in principle, not problematic; however, upon closer examination, they can lead to gender discrimination—a form of where one gender's fundamental rights are neglected, leaving them behind and subject to injustice. Manifestations of gender discrimination include the following forms: (1) Stereotyping is the attribution of positive or negative connotations to men and women; (2) Subordination is the practice of treating someone as secondary, resulting in them occupying a lower position than others, and thus not receiving priority; (3) Marginalisation is the act of placing a person, due to their gender, in a position where they are not considered significant in economic terms, even

though their role is crucial, (4) Violence is any form of unpleasant behaviour directed at another person, whether physical or psychological (5) *Double burden* refers to a situation in which a person is forced to bear a disproportionate workload.

The verses of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, which constitute the primary sources of Islamic teachings, contain universal values that serve as a guide for human life in the past, present and future. These values include humanity, justice, freedom, equality and so on. Regarding the values of justice and equality, Islam has never tolerated any distinction or discriminatory treatment amongst humankind (Thahir, 2000). When discussing women, we are first directed to examine the Qur'an's perspective on their creation. For it is from this perspective that claims—whether positive or negative—regarding women arise. Chronologically, the origins of human creation are not explained by the Qur'an (Gusmian, 2003). As has been explained, humans are born equal and free, as stated or implied by the Qur'an in Surah al-Hujurat, verse 13, that men and women are equal in their rights and responsibilities as human beings created by God. It is merely that their roles differ in accordance with the nature inherent in each. Before Allah the Almighty, what distinguishes them is the degree of their piety towards Him (Lopa, 1996).

Whether biological sex determines gender roles or the other way round, what is clear is that such differences are not a problem as long as they do not lead to *gender inequalities*. However, in reality, gender differences have given rise to various forms of injustice, particularly for women. This can be seen through various manifestations such as marginalisation, subordination, the creation of *stereotypes* (labelling), violence, and intimidation.

The campaign against gender discrimination has gained momentum with the involvement of local intellectuals who have spoken out in favour of gender equality. This movement has been categorised by Muhammad Noor Harisudin in his dissertation, **The Domestic Role of Women According to K.H. Abd. Muchith Muzadi**, as 'Traditional-Conservative Muslim Feminism', with figures such as Ratna Megawangi. Another category is Liberal Muslim Feminists, with figures such as Masdar F. Mas'udi, Nasarudin Umar, Husein Muhammad, Siti Musdah Mulia, and Faqihudin Abdul Kadir. The final category is Moderate Muslim Feminists, which includes a number of names such as Zakiyah Drajat and Abd. Muchith Muzadi.

In addition to the names mentioned above, M. Quraish Shihab deserves to be highlighted as an interpreter in light of his views on gender equality. In his various published works, particularly in his book entitled "Women: From Love to Sex, from Mut'ah Marriage to Sunnah Marriage, from Old Biases to New Biases", it is very clear how Quraish strives to move beyond the mainstream right-wing thinking that seeks to confine women to domestic spheres, as well as left-wing thinking that tends to go to extremes in understanding equality between men and women. This is why the author has chosen gender equality as the focus of this study.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a method that generates data in written or spoken form; this approach is expected to provide detailed,

clear and accurate answers to the research questions, particularly those relating to the focus of the study (Moleong, 2010). The type of research employed is a literature review (*Library Research*) involving a conceptual and *content analysis*. The method employed is a *literature review*, specifically a survey of books, journals, or reading materials related to the research problem, particularly the Qur'an, the Al-Misbah commentary, Ibn Kathir's commentary, the Munir commentary, books on Islamic education, and gender equality within the family (Arikunto, 1998). In line with the focus of this study, namely the thoughts of M. Quraish Shihab on gender equality, this research is classified as *library research*. This study is aimed at examining the substance of texts in the form of the thoughts and ideas of figures as philosophical works or works containing philosophical content. In this regard, the concept of gender equality and its implications for Islamic families in Indonesia, as set out in the works to be revealed in the research data sources.

3. RESULTS

Qur'anic verses concerning *gender equality*

Regarding the nature of the creation of men and women, Surah al-Rum verse 21, Surah an-Nisa' verse 1, Surah al-Hujurat verse 13, which essentially state that Allah SWT has created human beings in pairs, namely men and women, so that they may live in peace and tranquillity, so that they may love and cherish one another, so that many men and women may be born and spread throughout the world, and so that they may come to know one another. The verses above demonstrate a reciprocal relationship between men and women, and none of them indicate the superiority of one gender over the other.

Regarding the status and equality of men and women: Surah Al-Imran, verse 195; Surah An-Nisa', verse 124; Surah An-Nahl, verse 97; Surah At-Tawbah, verses 71–72; Surah Al-Ahzab, verse 35. These verses state that Allah SWT specifically calls upon both women and men to uphold Islamic values through faith, piety and good deeds. Allah SWT also assigns equal roles and responsibilities to men and women in the pursuit of their spiritual lives. Furthermore, Allah imposes the same consequences upon both men and women for any wrongdoing they commit. In essence, the status and standing of men and women in the eyes of Allah SWT are equal; the only factor distinguishing them is their faith and piety (Umar, 1996).

The Fundamental Beliefs Underlying Injustice Towards Women

- a. The belief that women were created from a man's rib, and are therefore regarded as a secondary being who could not possibly exist without the presence of men. As women's existence is viewed merely as a complement and they were created solely to submit to male authority.
- b. The belief that women were the cause of the expulsion of humankind (men) from paradise, leading women to be viewed with hatred, suspicion, and disgust; indeed, women are even regarded as the source of calamity.

The Qur'an does not teach discrimination between men and women as human beings. In the sight of Allah, men and women have equal status and standing. Therefore, views that marginalise the position of women ought to be changed, for the Qur'an always calls for justice, security and peace, prioritising good and preventing evil. It is these verses that form the basis of *the maqasid al-Shari'ah*, or the primary objectives of Islamic law.

If any interpretation is found to be inconsistent with the principles of justice and human rights, then that interpretation must be reconsidered (Thahir, 2000).

Chronologically speaking, the origins of humankind are not explained in the Qur'an. The story of the creation of humankind is largely known through hadith, *Isra'iliyyat* narratives, and accounts derived from the Torah, the Gospel and the Talmud. The substance of the origins of Adam and Eve is also not clearly distinguished. There are indeed indications that Adam was created from clay and that Eve was created from Adam's rib, but these indications are derived from hadiths. The word 'Hawa', which has long been perceived as the woman who became Adam's wife, is never mentioned in the Qur'an at all. Indeed, the claim that Adam was the first human and of the male sex is still contested by some quarters.

Social Constructs and the Nature of Religion

Placing women in their rightful place is akin to completely dismantling the history of humanity that has unfolded over centuries, a history that challenges not only the male-dominated social system, but women themselves. Furthermore, existing social realities often use religious arguments as a basis for rejecting *gender* justice. Commentaries on religious texts are used to legitimise patriarchal patterns of life that grant special privileges to men and tend to marginalise women; men are regarded as the primary gender and women as the secondary gender.

This understanding of religion has become ingrained in women's subconscious and has persisted for so long that it has created the impression that women are indeed not worthy of being on an equal footing with men, and has fostered a skewed work ethic between these two genders of God's servants. Calls to reconstruct the interpretation of the verse '' regarding women's roles have once again been heard at a national seminar entitled '*Gender Bias in the Interpretation of the Qur'an*', organised by the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jakarta at the Hotel Indonesia on Tuesday (28 May). According to *gender* studies expert Nasaruddin Umar, the issue of justice has so far tended to overlook the underlying problem. He stated that we have largely focused on issues that are, in fact, merely the consequences of this. Nasaruddin emphasised that this *gender* phenomenon indicates that religious understanding (theology) is the primary cause (*prima causa*) in giving rise to various *gender-biased* perceptions (Umar, 1996). Within Islam, there are several controversial issues relating to *gender* relations, including the origin of women's creation, the concept of inheritance, testimony, polygamy, reproductive rights, the right to divorce, and women's public roles. Indeed, a cursory reading of the verses relating to these issues suggests the existence of inequality (injustice) towards women.

However, Nasaruddin explains that if examined in depth using semantic, semiotic and hermeneutic analysis, and taking into account the theory of *sabab al-nuzul*, it can be understood that these verses represent a process of constructively realising justice within society. All the verses concerning women were revealed in response to specific cases that occurred during the time of the Prophet; this implies that these verses are of a specific nature. Furthermore, it is believed that interpretation has been the primary cause of *gender* bias.

The Urgency of Gender-Equal Islamic Religious Education

A strategy for mainstreaming gender equality is required through Islamic religious education materials, given that the lives of the Muslim majority reflect the actual reality of factual inequalities as follows: *firstly*, patterns of male-female relations in Muslim communities in Java, for example, are a reflection of a system of knowledge regarding male-female relations that has been absorbed from Javanese culture and interpretations of religious teachings socialised through educational institutions such as pesantren, madrasahs and schools. *Secondly*, several studies indicate that pesantren educational institutions are still largely characterised by a paternalistic leadership style. Many pesantren use the text *'Uqud al-Lujjain*, which sets out the rights and obligations of husbands and wives in an unbalanced manner (Sulistianingsih et al, 2004). Based on these facts, it is clear that there is a pressing need for gender mainstreaming within the knowledge system of Islamic society, and this can only be achieved through efforts to mainstream gender via education.

Whether we admit it or not, education is the key to achieving gender equality in society, as it serves not only as a means of transforming social norms, knowledge and skills, but also as a tool for examining and communicating new ideas and values. Therefore, within educational institutions—as venues for the transfer of knowledge to the public—efforts to achieve gender equality must be prioritised from the outset. To move towards the realisation of this, it is necessary, *first*, to implement gender equality in education and eliminate discrimination against students; *second*, to strive for equality among leadership; and *third*, to mitigate the causes of violence and discrimination through the knowledge taught, the learning processes undertaken, and by opposing all ideas and thoughts that contain *stereotyping*.

This analysis demonstrates that the curriculum is a key element in the implementation of gender mainstreaming in education¹⁴. The curriculum essentially serves as a framework or vehicle for articulating and developing the vision and mission of an educational institution, ensuring that these objectives are effectively realised. This curriculum is then elaborated upon in teaching materials and all their associated tools; consequently, educational institutions committed to gender equality will incorporate these gender equality efforts into their vision and mission, which will subsequently be implemented through the curriculum and its components and tools. On this basis, the mainstreaming of gender through teaching materials is of such importance and is grounded in several considerations. *Firstly*, educational experiences have a significant influence on the values and ways of thinking developed by educators, where these experiences collectively shape *the mindset*, attitudes and rational behaviour of both men and women. *Secondly*, gender inequality has become an undeniable reality in almost every sector of life; as evidenced by *stereotyping*, subordination, marginalisation, the double burden and violence against women, which frequently occur; consequently, a systematic effort is required to address this, namely by raising women's awareness of their rights and obligations in a balanced manner, whilst simultaneously providing men with evidence-based information that what they have long accepted is, in fact, *gender-biased*. *Thirdly*, the internalisation of these non-gender-biased values will be all the more

effective if grounded in religious texts; thus, by demonstrating that gender-biased manipulation of religious texts has occurred and that religious doctrines have been *misinterpreted*, the religious emotions and consciousness of the younger generation will be stirred, leading them to adopt a critical stance towards such interpretations; this, in turn, fosters a dynamic of interpretation that gives rise to a dynamic of religious thought which profoundly influences the dynamics of social life.

Furthermore, when it comes to strategies for integrating gender-related content into a curriculum—so that it is effectively implemented in teaching materials—there are at least four levels of integration that need to be addressed. *First, the contributions approach.* This approach is implemented through the existing systems and policies of educational institutions via the curriculum. Gender issues are explicitly incorporated into the existing curriculum. *Second, the additive approach.* In this approach, variations and alternative perspectives are added to the curriculum without altering its structure. New ideas and concepts regarding gender can be incorporated and aligned with the existing curriculum. *Third, the transformational approach.* In this approach, the objectives, structure and perspectives within the curriculum are completely overhauled and replaced with gender-sensitive objectives and perspectives. *Fourth, the social action approach.* In this approach, students are guided to make gender-sensitive decisions and take gender-sensitive actions in their daily lives; this can be achieved by discussing concepts, roles and gender relations in society, such as why discrimination against women occurs, what causes such discrimination, how it manifests in the classroom, and how such discrimination should be addressed. The aim of this approach is to enable students to engage in social critique and even bring about social change.

Thus, it can be affirmed that gender mainstreaming is so urgent that it must be promoted through teaching materials, including religious materials (especially as many of these *are highly gender-biased*), by selecting one of the four approaches outlined above, taking into account the actual circumstances on the ground. Indeed, as far as possible, ideal approaches such as the *transformational* and *social action approaches* should be applied in efforts to bring about radical change; however, if the dynamics of social life do not permit the adoption of an ideal approach, the *additive approach* is also a wise choice, as the priority is on bringing about change in gender perspectives, so that gender inequality can be reduced to the lowest possible level, if possible.

Gender Equality in the Qur'an According to M. Quraish Shibah in Tafsir Al-Misbah

Debates regarding the relationship between men and women are often influenced by interpretations of Qur'anic verses. Throughout the history of exegesis, many interpretations have tended to be patriarchal, thereby placing women in a subordinate position. However, developments in modern Islamic thought have introduced a new approach that is more contextual and humanistic, as presented by M. Quraish Shihab through his monumental work, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah*. Quraish Shihab endeavours to interpret the verses of the Qur'an by taking into account social, historical and linguistic contexts, thereby producing a fairer and more balanced understanding of gender relations.

According to Quraish Shihab, the Qur'an essentially regards men and women as equal beings in terms of their humanity. Both have balanced rights and obligations as servants of Allah and vicegerents on earth. Shihab emphasises that equality does not imply absolute sameness. Biological and psychological differences are still recognised as part of the divine order, but must not form the basis for discrimination (Ichwan & Amin, 2022). Quraish Shihab employs a contextual-humanist hermeneutical approach, which encompasses several key principles:

a. The Contextual Approach

Interpretation is carried out by taking into account the *asbab al-nuzul* and the social conditions at the time the verse was revealed. This is important so that the verse is not understood merely in a textual sense (Amal & Imawan, 2025).

b. Linguistic Approach

The meaning of words in Arabic is analysed in depth to avoid semantic bias.

c. Humanistic Approach

Interpretation is guided by the values of justice, the common good, and respect for human dignity.

d. Principle of Moderation

Shihab adopts a middle ground between conservative and liberal interpretations, thus avoiding extremes in understanding gender equality.

Interpretation of Gender-Related Verses in Tafsir Al-Misbah

Some key verses interpreted by Quraish Shihab include:

a. QS. Al-Baqarah: 187 (The Concept of Libas)

This verse states that husband and wife are "garments" for one another. Shihab interprets this as a symbol of a reciprocal relationship, of mutual protection and complementarity.

b. QS. An-Nisa: 34 (The Concept of Qiwwamah)

This verse is often interpreted as legitimising male dominance. However, according to Shihab, *qiwwamah* refers to responsibility, not superiority. Leadership is functional in nature and may vary according to circumstances (Rahmawati & Nawawi, 2024).

c. QS. Al-Hujurat: 13

This verse affirms that humanity was created into nations so that they might come to know one another, and that honour is determined by piety, not gender.

d. The Concept of Mubadalah (Mutuality)

Relationships between men and women are reciprocal and complementary in both social and family life (Syahira et al., 2025)

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion of gender equality in the Qur'an through a critical study of M. Quraish Shihab's interpretation in Tafsir Al-Misbah, it can be concluded that the Qur'an fundamentally affirms the principle of equality between men and women in human, spiritual and moral terms. Both hold equal standing as servants of Allah and vicegerents on earth, with the measure of their nobility determined by piety, not gender.

Quraish Shihab's exegesis demonstrates a contextual, moderate, and justice-oriented approach. He interprets gender-related verses by taking into account linguistic, historical, and social aspects, leading to the understanding that differences between men and women are functional, not hierarchical. Concepts such as *qiwamah* are understood as responsibility, not domination, whilst the husband-wife relationship is viewed as a complementary partnership (*mubadalah*).

According to Quraish Shihab, the Qur'an affirms the equality of men and women in human, spiritual and moral terms. Any differences that exist are understood as functional, not hierarchical. In his interpretation, Quraish Shihab employs a contextual, linguistic, and moderate approach, resulting in an understanding that emphasises the principles of justice, reciprocity (*mubadalah*), and partnership within the family.

REFERENCES

- Adler, Philip J., (2010). "World Civilisation", in Adian Husaini, *Gender Equality: Concepts and Their Impact on Islam*, Jurnal Islamia Vol. III No. 5, 2010.
- Alimi, Muh. Yasir, (2002). *The Gender of God* (Yogyakarta: LKiS).
- Amal, M. F., & Imawan, D. H. (2025). Quraish Shihab's Hermeneutics in Examining Gender Verses in Tafsir Al-Misbah.
- Anwar, A. K., et al. (2024). Understanding the Concept of Gender in Qur'anic Interpretation.
- Fadil SJ, (2013). *The Rise and Fall of Islamic Civilisation Through the Lens of History* (Malang: UIN Press, 2008) Fakih, Mansour, *Gender Analysis and Social Transformation* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar).
- Gusmian, Islah. (2003). *The Treasury of Indonesian Exegesis and Hermeneutics to Ideology*, (Jakarta: Teraju).
- Harisudin, Muhammad Noor, *The Domestic Role of Women according to K.H. Abd. Muchith Muzadi*, p. 65 and following.
In: <http://digilib.uinsby.ac.id/9525/3/babii.pdf>
- Hasan, Mizanul, (2009). *Women as Wives: An Analysis of the Thought of M. Quraish Shihab* (Yogyakarta: Faculty of Sharia, Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University).
- Hidayat, Komaruddin, (1996). *Understanding the Language of Religion: A Hermeneutical Study* (Jakarta: Paramadina).
- Ichwan, M. N., & Amin, F. (2022). Quraish Shihab's Interpretation of Gender Equality in Tafsir Al-Misbah.
- Irfan, Nurul, (2010). *M. Quraish Shihab's Perspective on Working Women* (Jakarta: Faculty of Sharia and Law, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah).
- Lexy J. Moleong, (2010). *Qualitative Research Methodology* (Jakarta: Rineka Cipta).
- Lopa, Baharuddin. (1996). *The Qur'an and Human Rights*, (Yogyakarta: Dana Bhakti Prima Yasa).

- M. Quraish Shihab, (2016). *Tafsir al-Misbah: The Message, Impression and Harmony of the Qur'an*, Volume 2, Jakarta: Lentera Hati.
- M. Quraish Shihab, (2017). *Insights into the Qur'an*, Bandung: Mizan Khasanah Ilmu-Ilmu Islam.
- Megawangi, Ratna, (1999). *Embracing Difference? A New Perspective on Gender Relations* (Bandung: Mizan).
- Mustafa P., (2010). *M. Quraish Shihab, Grounding Islamic Theology in Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar).
- Nur, Afrizal, (2012). "M. Quraish Shihab and the Rationalisation of Exegesis", in, *USHULUDDIN Journal* Vol. XVIII No. 1, January 2012
- Rahmawati, N., & Nawawi, A. M. (2024). Gender Equality in the Al-Misbah Exegesis.
- Rohana, (2011). *A Descriptive Study of Quraish Shihab's Thoughts on the Concept of Reading in Surah Al-'Alaq, Verses 1-5* (Yogyakarta: Faculty of Arts and Cultural Studies, Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University).
- Shihab, M. Quraish, *Women: From Love to Sex, From Temporary Marriage to Marriage*
- Suharsini Arikunto, *Research Procedures: A Practical Approach* (Jakarta: Rineka Cipta, 1998).
- Susilaningsih and Agus M. Najib, eds. (2004). *Gender Equality in Islamic Higher Education*, (Yogyakarta: UIN Sunan Kalijogo and McGill IISEP).
- Syahira, S. A., et al. (2025). *Interpretation of Gender Verses in Tafsir Al-Mishbah*.
- Thahir, Mursyidah. (2000). *Islamic Thought on Women's Empowerment*, (Jakarta: PP Muslimat NU in collaboration with Logos Wacana Ilmu).
- Tohari, Chamim, (2011). "The Construction of Quraish Shihab's Thought on the Law of the Hijab: A Critical Hermeneutical Study", in *SALAM Journal*, Volume 14, Issue 1, January-June 2011
- Umar, Nasaruddin, (2001). *The Argument for Gender Equality from the Perspective of the Qur'an* (Jakarta: Paramadina).