



Women in the Public Sphere: Gender Equality in Islamic Theology


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 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.10518>

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the equal role of women in the public sphere in terms of Islamic theology. Discrimination against women due to race, nationality, or religion is a topic that is often discussed today. Looking at the position of women in various religious traditions can help find solutions to problems such as discrimination against women. Furthermore, this discrimination causes women to have limitations in the public sphere, thus suppressing women's productivity. This research aims to explain how the Qur'an can be interpreted to provide a more equitable theology of gender roles within the Islamic framework. The research strategy combines a qualitative descriptive approach with a literature review. Research questions were guided by Qur'anic verses and answered using literature sources, including books, scholarly journals, and the most popular online databases. The findings of this study show that the Qur'ān does not support discrimination based on gender. Regarding receiving a broad message, both men and women are given equal weight in the Qur'ānic framework. There are too many possible interpretations of the term "gender equality" to make any concrete conclusions. The solution to all the world's problems can be found in the Qur'ānic literature, which promotes gender equality through balance, fairness, and proportion. The Qur'an uses existing arguments to describe the importance of women's role in the public sphere, both as Servants and Caliphs. The role of women in the public sphere is different from that of men, but in terms of calculation, the portion assigned to women and men is relatively balanced. The idea that Islam is a religion of sexism is also not supported by the language and literature of the Qur'an. The author argues that the Qur'anic principles of gender equality can be applied to modern efforts to eliminate derogatory stereotypes.



Keywords: Gender equity, women, public space, Islamic theology.

Introduction

Religious contexts have a long history of imposing rigid gender roles on women. This has resulted in religious discrimination against men and women and excluding women from the public sector. Many traditional religions have been criticized for supporting discrimination against women and the subordination of women to subordinate roles. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or religion is an issue that is often discussed today. Feminists disagree on how to explain the position of women in religious beliefs and how to end discrimination against women (Petersen, 2020).

Religion is blamed for the persistence of sexism and racism. However, advocates of equality for women also point to the importance of questioning and reinterpreting traditional religious teachings and attitudes toward women (Iqbal et al., 2022). Despite societal shifts and traditional gender roles, religious gender differences exist in many communities (Pewresearch.org, 2016a). Gender gaps in religion are often attributed to biological or evolutionary origins, although some sociologists think that social and cultural variables also play a role (Pewresearch.org, 2016b). Religions vary widely in how they view gender equality; some encourage equality, while others treat men and women differently and limit some responsibilities to men. Women may face discrimination in many areas of society due to religious norms, secular laws, and cultural norms (Zed, 2016).

The discrimination experienced by women forms a stereotype that public activities are only for men. Unfortunately, this stereotype has led to the assumption that women are only tasked with caring for household matters such as children and kitchen work. This problem certainly suppresses women's productivity in the public sphere so that in society, the role of women is not very significant.

In this modern era, there should be a significant change where the division of household duties is no longer the sole responsibility of women. Ideally, women should be recognized as individuals with the same rights, choices, and aspirations as men. Gender equality recognizes the importance of sharing responsibilities in household management and caring for children. This allows women to participate more actively in work, education, and social and economic life.

Meanwhile, Islam recognizes women's religious, social, economic, and legal rights (Un.org, 2008). Women are guaranteed support in all stages of life, including as daughters, wives, mothers, and sisters. Equality in Islam is not based on mutual imitation but on recognizing differences and interdependence between men and women (Iqbal, 2020). Men and women are designed to need each other and have complementary roles. As such, diverse practices in Muslim countries often reflect cultural influences rather than the core teachings of Islam (Roy et al., 2022). It is essential to distinguish between cultural practices and Islamic principles when discussing gender equality. There are different interpretations and understandings of gender equality in Islam (Duderija, 2020). Some argue Islam champions the equality of men and women, while others point to differences in certain practices or roles (Saiful & Fendri, 2020). Interpretations of gender equality in Islam can vary among individuals, scholars, and cultural contexts. This study aims to explain how a more just and equal understanding of gender roles in the Islamic framework is based on the Qur'an with a tafsir approach.

Literature Review

Gender equality from a theological perspective has been explored in previous articles, as has explored how Christianity, particularly Catholicism, is used to respond to gender-based



violence in Papua New Guinea (Hermkens et al., 2022). Previous studies have also delved into feminist and Christian analyses needed to understand how each explores gender and gender equality (Kohm, 2008). Meanwhile, CBE International, an organization that advocates for biblical equality, affirms the equal standing of men and women in church and marriage and deplors the historical oppression and silencing of women due to sexism and racism (Groothuis, 1996). Another study has used liberal feminist theory to discuss gender equality in leadership in Tanzania by examining biblical, cultural, social, and other factors (Kategile, 2020).

Further, another study explored gender roles and gender equality in the Evangelical Church, using theology to identify with women and re-evaluate literature and ideologies through a female lens (Bishop, 2019). Further, a study addressed theological critiques of gender disparities in Christian leadership, using theological models and Christian theology to develop a deep understanding of gender disparities (Akpotor & Ejiroghene, 2019). Meanwhile, Islamic theology is seen by some as a way to achieve gender equality, as it is a religion that emphasizes egalitarianism for all adherents (Galloway, 2014). However, other studies have found that Islamic doctrine can challenge gender equality, particularly in women's leadership and gender issues (Supriyadi et al., 2019). There is an ongoing debate about the relationship between Islamic law and gender equality, with some scholars arguing that there may be common ground between the two (Mashhour, 2005).

Islamic feminism has emerged as a transnational discourse that emphasizes the importance of gender equality within an Islamic framework. Islamic feminists argue that historical legacies and the dominant male "voice" in Islamic theology have led to gender-unequal interpretations of religious sources despite Islam's egalitarian principles (Eger, 2021). Studies have found that religious socialization is multi-faceted and gendered and that certain men and women are more inclined and equipped to support gender equality than others (Glas et al., 2018). The literature on gender equality in Islamic societies tends to align with specific traits, such as a focus on women's rights and the role of women in Islamic societies. Overall, the literature shows debates and discussions about the relationship between Islamic and Christian theologies on gender equality.

Methodology

This research uses descriptive qualitative research methods with literature studies. It should be noted that qualitative descriptive research methods with literature studies rely primarily on existing data and do not involve direct data collection from participants. Instead, it involves analyzing and synthesizing information from various sources to provide a comprehensive picture of the research topic (Nassaji, 2015). This study aims to explain how gender roles in the Islamic framework are based on the Qur'an with a tafsir approach. The data collection techniques were gathered through Quranic verses and utilizing literature sources, such as books, academic journals, and reputable online databases, to gather relevant information to answer the research objectives.

The author extracted and compiled data from selected sources relevant to qualitative data, such as quotations, descriptions, and narratives. Next, they categorized and organized the collected data based on themes or patterns. They were, moreover, interpreting and describing the findings, discussing the implications of the findings and their significance to the research problem. In addition, it summarises the main findings and draws conclusions based on descriptive analysis (Kim et al., 2017).

Results

Criticisms of Islam that are against gender equality are insubstantial. The reason is that the Qur'an refutes this opinion through verses that contain evident egalitarian principles. The



egalitarian principle is one of Islamic law's main themes and principles, especially in the context of gender equality. Both men and women have the same position in the Islamic perspective. This is as expressed in QS. al-Hujurat: 13.

"O mankind, we have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest among you in the sight of Allah is the most pious among you".

According to Katsir (1999), the above verse completely degrades the view of gender discrimination between men and women. On the contrary, the above verse indicates that the Qur'an views gender equality in a broader context. Although the context of the above verse is worship, it can be understood that the Qur'anic literature on gender indicates a balance between men and women. In this verse, equality can be viewed from various aspects, both in social and spiritual strata.

Allah created men and women as a form of perfection and harmony. Through this gender difference, complementarity is realized that can be optimized in social life. In their uniqueness, men and women acquire complementary roles, abilities, and characteristics, creating beauty in the harmony of His creation. God intentionally created differences but freed humans from discrimination and other primordial ties. Even so, the principles emphasized by the Qur'an should be more noticed (Salim, 2002). Terminologically, the context of *khalifatullâh fî al-ardh* indicates an equal position in the context of leadership. At this level, it can be understood that every human being carries a leader's mandate on earth. Arguments stating that the Qur'an and Hadith contain a discriminatory context seem insubstantial when viewed from an understanding of interpretation. Islam is a religion of mercy for all human beings that frees each individual from the problems of masculinity and misogyny.

The gender perspective in the Qur'an provides an evident illustration of the complexity and collaboration between men and women. Compiled from a series of gender-related verses, the Qur'ân organizes gender complexity through correlations between humans, God, and nature. This complexity of harmony (*azwaj*) does not only speak to the human level but also other living beings (See, QS al-Syura 11 and QS Thaha 53).

It is important to remember that the Qur'anic interpretation of gender equality varies significantly among the Mufasssirs. Some verses in the Qur'ân emphasize the equality of fundamental rights between men and women. For example, in QS al-Ahzab verse 35, which reads:

"Verily, the Muslim man and the Muslim woman, the believing man and the believing woman, the obedient man and the obedient woman, the righteous man and the righteous woman, the patient man, and the patient woman, the devout man and the devout woman, the charitable man and the charitable woman, the fasting man and the fasting woman, the man who preserves his honour and the woman who preserves her honour, the man who mentions Allah much and the woman who mentions Allah much, Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward."

Allah tells all His servants to submit to Him regardless of gender. Allah does not look at gender in worship because Allah created men and women as His creatures who both have the potential to worship and seek His pleasure. The criteria in worship are determined by the piety and faith of the individual, not by gender differences. The above verse shows that men and women have equal opportunities to get closer to Allah and develop their spirituality regardless of gender differences. Allah has prepared them for forgiveness for their sins and a great reward, Paradise (Al-Qarni, 2008).

This verse shows that in Islam, men and women are given equal rights and responsibilities in practising religion and achieving closeness to Allah. There is no discrimination based on



gender in the teachings of Islam. However, it should also be noted that other verses in the Qur'an provide for different roles and responsibilities between men and women in some contexts, such as in marriage and leadership in society. The interpretation and understanding of these verses may differ depending on the cultural, historical, and social context.

It is important to remember that in Islam, gender equality is not synonymous with absolute equality. Islam recognizes the biological differences between men and women and assigns them roles and responsibilities appropriate to their characteristics. This is often interpreted as equality in value and dignity before God but does not necessarily mean equality in all things. While the Qur'an recognizes the basic equality of rights between men and women, a more profound interpretation and understanding of gender issues in Islam often involves a broader context, including hadith and the Islamic scholarly tradition. The author assumes that gender equality is a multi-interpretive concept. However, the Qur'anic literature on gender emphasizes the concept of fairness and balance. This concept is considered ideal because equality and balance have terms with different meanings. At this level, the gender balance proposed by Islam is a concept capable of degrading the misconceptions that occur in society.

Discussion

The Position of Men and Women as Servants

There are many subjective arguments that Islam is a sexist religion. If you look at some of the verses in the Qur'an, this argument seems very problematic. Islam is a very open religion in terms of gender equality. This can be seen through several verses contained in the Qur'an. The Qur'an classifies gender equality into several parts, one of which is men and women as servants. Allah says in QS. al-Zariyat verse 56, which reads:

"And I did not create the jinn and humans but that they may serve Me."

This verse generally does not say a particular gender and sex in worship. Indeed, the word "serve" can be interpreted as a form of monotheism and worship. In the manner of worship, Allah stipulates proportional worship for both men and women. However, additional attributes in worship have differences whose purpose is to maintain the essence and existence of the value of worship itself. On the other hand, the additional attributes of worship are only because Allah wants to maintain the dignity of women and men with the aim of balance (Muhammad et al., 2011). In addition, the above verse indicates the form of the first person (I) because the affirmation is to worship Allah. Indeed, worship is a form of submission and obedience due to a sense of exaltation from a servant who serves (Shihab, 2004). Then, Sayyid Quthb (2010) argues that, in essence, there is a specific purpose for humans and jinn. Both have an equal position of duty in serving God without exception.

Furthermore, humans who ignore the worship of God will not feel eternal happiness. Ideally, worship is a means God gives to strengthen the spiritual bond with Him. It helps to direct the mind and heart towards God, providing a sense of serenity, comfort, and meaning in life. The worship in question is not only vertical but also horizontal. (See QS al-Zariyat verse 56). Then, the position of man as a servant is found in QS. Al-Nahl verse 97 which reads:

"Whoever does good, whether male or female in a state of faith, We will surely give him a good life and We will reward him with a better reward than what they have done".

In this verse, Allah offers the hint: "Whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, and they are in a state of faith, then indeed We will give him a good life, and indeed We will reward them with a better reward than what they have done." Allah's hint is addressed to those who believe and do righteous deeds. In retrospect, if this hint offered by Allah is implemented, it will be avoided from sin (Al-Jaza'iri, 2003).



Although the above verses can degrade the perception that Islam is a discriminatory religion, some people still think otherwise. The meanings of the verses that the author describes have not been able to be internalized openly and informatively for those who still think Islam is a sexist and discriminatory religion. Regardless of the series of pros and cons above, the author believes there is no longer a place to raise discriminatory issues against Islam. Furthermore, the correlation between Qur'anic verses regarding gender is very substantive and does not contain discriminatory values. Moreover, the mufassirs agree with the argument that Islam upholds equality. Therefore, with the concept stated in the Qur'an, making women as development actors in society is very reliable.

Islam teaches that men and women are servants of Allah and equal in the eyes of Allah. However, there are differences in the roles and responsibilities given to men and women in Islam. For example, women are given a more central role in childcare due to their natural ability to give birth and care for newborns. Men, on the other hand, are considered to be the guardians of their families. The Quran considers the enslaved person as part of the family, even though his social status is lower than that of a free family member. However, Islamic law requires consent from both parties before marriage, regardless of the woman's status.

In heaven, both men and women will be showered with blessings, and there is no room for discrimination based on gender. Islam does not open the door of polygamy to all men, just as it does not open it to women. At its core, Islam respects the different capacities and abilities of men and women and assigns them the roles that best suit them. Men and women are servants of God and equal in the eyes of God.

In Islamic theology, the role of women as servants in the public sphere covers various aspects. At this level, the portion of women as servants in the public sphere is significant, such as worship. Women must worship Allah in the public sphere in the same way as men. This includes the implementation of prayer, fasting, zakat, and other acts of worship by religious guidance. In addition, women also carry out the task of da'wah, the portion of which is no different from men.

Then, women can create community productivity by strengthening the economy. For example, women in Ternate can move into the trade sector to help the community's economy (Hi Usman & Hi Umar, 2020). In addition, women can be involved in various social and humanitarian activities in the community. They can participate in charity activities, humanitarian aid, or social programs that help people in need. It is important to note that women's role as servants in the public sphere in Islam reflects the religion's principles of gender equality. Islam recognizes the equal moral rights and responsibilities of women and men in practicing religious teachings and contributing to society and the lives of Muslims. Interpretations and practices of women's public roles may vary across Muslim communities and based on cultural and social contexts.

Equality of Men and Women as Caliphs

The concept of humans as leaders (Khalifah) on earth can also be analyzed from a gender perspective. The roles and responsibilities of Khalifah do not only apply to one gender but involve men and women as a whole. This article discusses gender roles and responsibilities in the concept of humans as caliphs and the importance of gender equality in carrying out these duties.

As caliphs, humans are responsible for protecting and caring for the natural world. This involves protecting the environment's biodiversity and preventing damage. In this regard, gender roles are not a determining factor. Both men and women have the same abilities and responsibilities in caring for the earth. In QS Ar-Rum verse 41, Allah says:



"There is destruction on land and in the sea because of the deeds of men, that Allah may taste to them some of the consequences of their deeds, that they may return."

According to al-Suyuthi (2015), this verse asserts that humans are collectively responsible for the damage done to the earth. Human actions, whether male or female, have consequences that must be accounted for. Therefore, regardless of gender, we must work together to improve and protect the environment. In addition, the Qur'an indicates that the position of men and women as caliphs is equal, as stated in QS. Al-Baqarah 30, which reads:

"And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels, "I want to make a caliph on earth." They said, "Do you intend to make therein one who will destroy and shed blood while we praise you and sanctify your name?" He said, "Indeed, I know what you do not know."

The above evidence is the duty of human beings who are obliged to lead the community's life by stopping disputes and injustices that must be resolved constitutionally. Through this verse, Allah describes the glory of human beings, which is general regardless of gender. The context of this verse is the doubt of the creatures before humans because humans were created with the power of desire and ghadab. This power is feared to lead to bloodshed. However, humans are endowed with the glory of reason and obedience (Baydawi, 2010). Al-Qurthubi suggests that the angels' refutation is not due to envy or opposition to God's will (Qurtubi, 2002).

In line with the verse above, there is also a hadith that strengthens the position of humans as caliphs in Bukhari's hadith number 4789. This hadith indicates that both men and women proportionally have the same responsibility as caliphs. The equality expressed in this hadith is not the equality of work responsibilities but individual responsibilities from the perspective of balance. Even an enslaved person is also designated as a leader over his master's property, which will be cumulatively accounted for. Every soul is a leader and will be held accountable (Al-Bukhārī, 2002).

God's purpose in making humans caliphs has various interpretations in different religious traditions. In Islam, the primary purpose of Allah SWT is to make humans as caliphs on earth, which can be explained through several perspectives. Firstly, devotion to God: Humans, as caliphs, are regarded as God's representatives. The primary purpose of the creation of humans as caliphs is for humans to devote themselves to God, obey His commands, and carry out the duties of caliphs with full awareness of the oneness of God in order to obtain His blessings (Rohana, 2023).

At this level, the author outlines several theological points that indicate that women have responsibilities as leaders in the public sphere, including:

Women as Political and Development Leaders

Humans, as caliphs, also aim to build and develop the universe's potential. In this case, humans have the intellectual ability, creativity, and innovation to explore natural resources, create civilization, and improve the quality of life for all living things. This goal relates to social, economic, cultural, and scientific development that can benefit humanity (Usman et al., 2023).

In Islam, no provisions explicitly prevent women from holding political positions or playing a role in community development. On the contrary, Islam encourages women's active participation in public affairs by Islamic moral and ethical principles. The Prophet Muhammad himself listened to and valued women's opinions. Many examples in early Islamic history show women being involved in various aspects of community life, including politics and the economy.



Women's role as political and development leaders in Islam has excellent potential to advocate for policies that support the welfare of women, children, and families and champion Islamic moral and ethical values in public decision-making. Gender equality in Islam emphasizes that women and men have equal rights and responsibilities in social, political, and economic tasks. Therefore, increasing women's participation as leaders in Islamic theology can help create a more just, inclusive, and socially just society.

Women as Justice Enforcers (Judges)

God's purpose in making humans as caliphs is also related to the implementation of justice and goodness on earth. Humans are responsible for creating a just society, respecting each other, and caring for fellow creatures. It must be understood that the passions embedded in humans are a force in development (Rahmat & Fahrudin, 2018). Cumulatively, progress in the world occurs because of the collaboration of human lust and reason in development. If angels were sent as caliphs, civilization's progress would inevitably not be like now because angels only have reason.

The role of women as judges in Islamic theology is a subject that has sparked debate in various Muslim communities. Islam recognizes, in principle, women's intellectual ability and capacity to act as judges in deciding legal matters and social disputes. In the Quran, there is no specific prohibition for women to become judges. However, most traditional Islamic law interpretations and practices in various countries still favor male dominance in the judge position. Nonetheless, some Muslim communities have made efforts to promote gender equality in the judicial system by encouraging the participation of women as judges.

The participation of women as judges in Islamic theology can bring diverse perspectives to legal decision-making and provide greater justice in cases involving women. This also aligns with the principle of gender equality in Islam, which recognizes equal rights and responsibilities between women and men in various aspects of life. For many, increasing women's participation in the justice system is essential to creating a more just and inclusive society by Islamic values.

Ibn Jarir At-Thabari said that women may become judges in absolutely or any case with the logic that just as it is permissible to become a fatwa expert or mufti, women may also become judges (Al-Thabary, 2000). Quoted from the Nahdlatul Ulama Online website, judges are an essential profession that requires special skills. Therefore, the appointment of a judge must be preceded by formal requirements made by the state to ensure the quality, competence, expertise, and skills needed, in addition to integrity and a code of ethics that must be obeyed (Nahdlatul Ulama Online, 2019).

Humans as caliphs are not bound by gender because Allah's assignment to humans as leaders is general. This is because humans are endowed with two characteristics: lammat al-Malak (angelic traits) and lammat al-syaithan (shaitan traits). This means humans have the nature of maintaining and destroying, both of which are gifts in advancing civilization amid spiritual and social life dynamics. Their collaboration gives rise to reason and passion that can change the world regardless of sex or gender.

Men and Women Accept the Primordial Covenant

In some religious traditions, there is the concept of a primordial covenant between humans and God. This concept states that humans have entered into a covenant or promise with God before life. This primordial covenant involves the responsibilities and duties of humans as caliphs on earth. In religions such as Islam, this primordial covenant is often associated with events in the Realm of the Spirits before humans are born into the world. According to this belief, every human soul has made a promise to God to acknowledge Him as the sole God and to carry out the duties of a caliph on earth. The primordial concept in the Qur'an can be



seen in Q.S. QS.Al-'A'raf verses 20-23. This verse indicates that Adam and Eve were both active in the cosmic drama, not Eve, who influenced Adam to eat the fruit of Khuldi, but both were tempted and repented to God.

Before the story of prophets Adam and Eve, who swallowed the fruit of Khuldi, there was a story of jealousy from Syaithon because Allah wanted humans to become caliphs (Hamka, 1983). Presumably, this jealousy made Syaithon incite Adam and Eve to swallow the fruit of Khuldi and not Eve, who influenced Adam or vice versa. This story gives rise to the primordial between humans and God in general, both men and women. The concept of this primordial covenant carries moral and ethical significance. Humans have a moral responsibility to carry out the duties of a caliph with full awareness and obedience to God (Faishol, 2020). Violating this covenant is considered a violation of God's will and can have spiritual consequences. The primordial covenant also emphasizes the close relationship between humans and God. Humans are responsible as caliphs to carry out God's will. This concept underscores the importance of humanity's role and responsibility in creating justice, goodness, and harmony. It is important to remember that the primordial covenant is a theological concept that can vary in interpretation and emphasis among different religious traditions. It provides an ethical and spiritual framework for human beings as caliphs.

Conclusion

Through the above explanation, it can be concluded that the Qur'an does not justify gender discrimination. The Qur'anic level of gender emphasizes the concept of balance so that men and women receive general messages in a proportional status. The meaning of equality in the context of gender is difficult to understand. Therefore, the Qur'anic literature on gender equality with balance, justice, and proportion can answer all existing problems. In addition, the diction and literature of the Qur'an indicate that the argument that Islam is a sexist religion is an unsubstantial argument. The author suggests that the concept applied by the Qur'an in gender equality can be implemented in degrading misconceptions about gender that occur today.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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