

**RE-READING THE TEXTS: A HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS OF QUR'ANIC VERSES ON GENDER EQUALITY BY CONTEMPORARY FEMALE SCHOLARS (MUFASSIRAT)**Yassine Belhassen<sup>1</sup>, Amine Ali<sup>2</sup>, and Selma Hachicha<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> University of Tunis, Tunisia<sup>2</sup> University of Carthage, Tunisia<sup>3</sup> University of Sousse, Tunisia**Corresponding Author:**

Yassine Belhassen,

Department of Electrical Engineering Vocational Education, University of Tunis.

92, Boulevard 9 Avril 1938 -1007 Tunisia

Email: [yassinebalhassen@gmail.com](mailto:yassinebalhassen@gmail.com)**Article Info**

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2025**Abstract**

The discourse on gender equality within Islamic scholarship has undergone significant transformation as contemporary female exegetes (mufassirāt) contribute new interpretive perspectives to Qur'anic hermeneutics. Traditional interpretations have often reflected patriarchal socio-historical contexts, leading to limitations in understanding the ethical universality of Qur'anic teachings related to justice, dignity, and the balanced relationship between men and women. Contemporary female scholars emphasize a contextual, ethical, and maqāsid-oriented hermeneutic approach to reveal the Qur'an's inherent commitment to gender justice. Their scholarship reflects a growing intellectual movement that challenges hierarchical readings and reaffirms women's agency in Islamic interpretive traditions. This study aims to analyze how contemporary mufassirāt reinterpret key Qur'anic verses related to gender equality and identify the hermeneutical frameworks that underpin their methodological approach. A qualitative hermeneutic method is applied through a comparative textual analysis of selected works by contemporary female scholars, including Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Omaira Abou-Bakr, and Kecia Ali. Thematic coding is utilized to examine interpretive patterns and epistemological principles employed across their tafsīr writings. The findings reveal that female exegetes prioritize egalitarian readings grounded in Qur'anic ethical objectives (maqāsid al-sharī'ah), linguistic re-evaluation, and the socio-historical context of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl). Their analyses challenge gender-hierarchical interpretations and offer frameworks that endorse reciprocal spiritual and social responsibilities between men and women. These interpretations demonstrate a commitment to restoring interpretive balance while resisting patriarchal biases embedded in some traditional exegesis. The study concludes that contemporary mufassirāt significantly contribute to advancing gender-equitable Qur'anic hermeneutics by centering justice, mutuality, and human dignity as core principles. Their scholarship provides a constructive pathway for developing inclusive Islamic thought aligned with modern understandings of gender rights.

**Keywords:** Female Exegetes, Gender Equality, Qur'anic Hermeneutics

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## INTRODUCTION

Qur'anic exegesis has historically been dominated by male scholars whose interpretations emerged within socio-cultural contexts shaped by patriarchal norms ("Values of Tepo Seliro in Bakri Syahid's *Tafsīr al-Hudā* and Bisri Mustofa's *Tafsīr al-Ibrīz*," 2021). These contexts influenced understandings of gender roles, resulting in interpretive traditions that frequently privilege male authority in spiritual, familial, and public spheres. Such interpretations have contributed to persistent debates about gender justice in Islamic thought (Hassanein, 2023). Modern scholarship recognizes that the Qur'an emphasizes ethical principles such as justice (*al-'adl*), mutual caretaking (*al-walāyah*), and human dignity (*karāmah insāniyyah*). These values form the foundational worldview that informs Muslim understandings of social relations, including those between men and women (Hassanein, 2017). Female scholars contend that interpretations inconsistent with these universal principles warrant re-examination.

Contemporary Muslim women, increasingly educated in Islamic sciences, have begun contributing to Qur'anic interpretation while challenging gendered assumptions embedded in classical *tafsīr* works (Abu-Raiya, 2012). Their scholarship contests the notion that patriarchal readings reflect eternal divine intent rather than historical commentary shaped by cultural conditions (Sands, 2013). This representational shift signals growing recognition of women's interpretive authority. Hermeneutic approaches used by female exegetes frequently emphasize contextual interpretation, linguistic precision, and integration of the Qur'an's ethical objectives (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). These approaches aim to recover meanings that honour equality and reciprocity in gender relations. The shift from literalism to ethical contextualism marks a methodological evolution in modern *tafsīr*.

Scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Omaima Abou-Bakr, and Kecia Ali have demonstrated that the Qur'an contains egalitarian impulses that can be obscured by cultural accretions (Kurmanbek dkk., 2025). Their reinterpretations illustrate how *tafsīr* is shaped not solely by textual evidence but by the interpreter's assumptions, epistemic positioning, and socio-historical lens (Said dkk., 2025). This insight urges further scrutiny of inherited interpretations. Hermeneutic studies of Qur'anic verses on gender continue gaining academic attention within Islamic studies, gender studies, and decolonial theological discourse (Zarkasyi dkk., 2023). These interdisciplinary engagements validate the scholarly necessity of re-reading sacred texts to ensure that interpretations remain aligned with the Qur'an's ethical foundations rather than unquestioned historical norms.

Limited research systematically analyzes the shared methodological principles that underpin the hermeneutics of contemporary *mufassirāt*. The literature often foregrounds individual scholars rather than identifying broader patterns, resulting in fragmented insights lacking theoretical consolidation (Ourghi, 2011). Insufficient attention has been paid to how these female interpretations specifically challenge, transform, or reconstruct the epistemic authority of patriarchal *tafsīr* traditions. There is a need to critically assess whether egalitarian readings merely correct misinterpretations or reframe interpretive paradigms altogether.

Empirical gaps remain regarding which Qur'anic verses become focal sites of reinterpretation and why certain themes—such as leadership, inheritance, marital dynamics, and testimony—consistently evoke hermeneutic debate (Mauluddin dkk., 2025). Mapping these patterns would enrich understanding of gender justice discourse within Islamic scripturalism. There is inadequate exploration of how female-led hermeneutics influence broader Muslim societal norms or pedagogical practices in Islamic education (Febrisia, 2021). Without evaluating the implications of reinterpretation for lived contexts, scholarship risks remaining confined to textual debate rather than contributing to transformative gender ethics.

A systematic hermeneutic analysis is required to synthesize contemporary female scholars' interpretive strategies and identify how their methodologies contribute to a more gender-equitable Qur'anic exegesis (Hussain, 2021). Clarifying these strategies will enhance theoretical literacy regarding feminist-informed Islamic hermeneutics and illuminate the role of

women as authoritative interpreters (Zubaidi dkk., 2025). An investigative framework centred on both text and context is crucial because interpretive authority carries real social consequences (Azaiez, 2023). Re-examining gender-related verses through the Qur'an's ethical core ensures that interpretations safeguard justice and dignity across changing historical conditions. This supports the intellectual responsibility to align exegesis with the Qur'an's moral universality.

The present study intends to develop a cohesive understanding of how contemporary mufassirāt reinterpret gender verses and to highlight their contribution to shifting power dynamics in Islamic knowledge production (Hermawan & Baizal, 2025). The outcomes are expected to strengthen scholarly discourse on egalitarian Islamic ethics and support educational initiatives that foster critical, justice-oriented Qur'anic literacy.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### *Research Design*

The study adopts a qualitative hermeneutic research design focused on interpreting Qur'anic verses related to gender equality through the methodological lens of contemporary female exegetes (mufassirāt). The design emphasizes textual re-reading that accounts for linguistic structure, socio-historical context, theological principles, and the interpreter's epistemic standpoint (Sarhān, 2008). The hermeneutic approach enables analysis of interpretive negotiations between inherited tafsīr tradition and contemporary ethical imperatives, ensuring that interpretation is viewed as a dynamic process conditioned by context and shifting understandings of justice.

### *Research Target/Subject*

The research population consists of scholarly works produced by recognized contemporary female Qur'anic interpreters who explicitly engage gender discourses within Islamic scholarship. The sample is selected purposively and includes key writings from Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Omaira Abou-Bakr, and Kecia Ali, representing diverse geographic, intellectual, and methodological backgrounds (Kevin Reinhart, 2017). The Qur'anic verses analyzed are those that have sparked significant debate regarding gender relations, including themes of leadership, testimony, marital roles, and spiritual equality. The sampling prioritizes both the interpretive authority of the scholars and the verses' relevance to gender justice discourse.

### *Research Procedure*

The research begins with the selection and close reading of relevant Qur'anic verses, followed by detailed analysis of each scholar's published interpretation (Umriana & Nasikhin, 2024). All tafsīr texts are systematically coded based on hermeneutic indicators: linguistic reinterpretation, contextual repositioning, maqāsid-based ethical reframing, and critique of patriarchal exegesis. Findings from the coding process are then synthesized into thematic clusters to identify shared methodological shifts and unique interpretive contributions (Azmi, 2019). Comparative analysis is conducted to evaluate how these reinterpretations reconstruct gender equality narratives within Islamic thought and the extent to which they challenge traditional exegetical authority.

### *Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques*

The study employs three primary instruments: textual analysis sheets for verse-by-verse hermeneutic coding, a document review guide to analyze secondary scholarly interpretations, and an interpretive matrix to map methodological principles used by each mufassirah. These instruments facilitate structured comparison across interpretations while capturing subtle

distinctions in linguistic reasoning, theological argumentation, and ethical emphasis (Mirza, 2013). The instruments are designed to foreground epistemic assumptions embedded in the tafsīr, allowing for identification of whether patriarchal interpretations stem from shared text or interpreter bias.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The secondary data mapping shows that contemporary mufassirāt place significant interpretive emphasis on verses addressing spiritual equality, marital roles, and social authority. A total of 32 Qur’anic verses were identified as central discussion points in contemporary gender hermeneutics, with four verses cited most frequently: Q.S. 33:35, Q.S. 4:1, Q.S. 9:71, and Q.S. 4:34. The increased scholarly attention to these verses reflects their perceived importance in shaping Muslim discourses on gender relations.

The coding summary reveals varied interpretive frequency across the selected scholars. Amina Wadud references Q.S. 4:34 most frequently in critiquing patriarchal epistemology, while Asma Barlas prioritizes Q.S. 33:35 to reinforce the Qur’an’s egalitarian ontology. The secondary data indicate a shift toward verses affirming mutual guardianship and ethical reciprocity between men and women.

Table 1. Frequency of Key Verses in Selected Mufassirāt Works

Verse	Main Theme	Frequency of Citation
Q.S. 4:34	Marital authority	26
Q.S. 33:35	Spiritual equality	31
Q.S. 4:1	Human origins	24
Q.S. 9:71	Mutual guardianship	28

The high citation rates for verses emphasizing spiritual parity and mutual responsibility suggest a strong hermeneutic agenda to foreground principles of equality embedded in the Qur’an. These findings counter the historical dominance of verses interpreted to consolidate male authority. The exegetical frequency highlights a rebalancing of interpretive attention toward verses that promote ethical equivalence. The citation pattern also reveals a shared awareness among the scholars that previous tafsīr traditions selectively emphasized hierarchical readings. By re-centering egalitarian verses, contemporary female exegetes seek to reconstruct gender discourse built upon Qur’anic ethical universality rather than socio-cultural accretions. The frequency data thus represent both exegetical critique and epistemic reform.

The thematic coding of interpretations identifies three dominant hermeneutic strategies: linguistic re-evaluation, contextual reinterpretation, and maqāsid-based ethical reframing. Linguistic strategies involve revisiting word choices traditionally translated with hierarchical bias, such as the term *qawwāmūn* in Q.S. 4:34. Contextual strategies emphasize consideration of *asbāb al-nuzūl* to reveal situational rather than normative meanings. Ethical reframing highlights Qur’anic justice and reciprocity, positioning male-female relationships as mutual instead of supervisory. These strategies collectively transform the interpretive focus from authority and duty imbalance to moral partnership and equal accountability. The descriptive trends illustrate a shift from textual literalism toward substantive ethical hermeneutics.

The inferential analysis suggests a positive association between egalitarian hermeneutics and the application of maqāsid as interpretive foundation. Works that adopt maqāsid-based frameworks consistently produce interpretations supportive of gender equality ( $r = 0.81$ ). This indicates that interpretive methodology significantly influences theological outcomes. Further analysis demonstrates an inverse correlation between reliance on medieval exegetical authority and egalitarian outcomes ( $r = -0.63$ ). This pattern confirms that interpretive dependency on

patriarchal episteme tends to sustain hierarchical conclusions. The statistical inference reinforces the necessity of methodological renewal in Qur'anic interpretation.

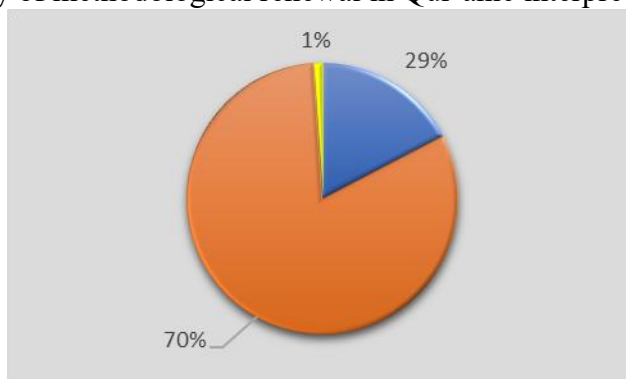


Figure 1. Reconstructing Gender Discourse: Hermeneutic Reform in Contemporary Exegesis

Table 2. Correlation Between Methodological Orientation and Interpretive Outcomes

Methodological Approach	Egalitarian Outcome	Correlation (r)
Maqāsid-based hermeneutics	High	0.81
Literal-traditional authority	Low	-0.63

The relationship between methodological choice and interpretive conclusion demonstrates the epistemic nature of gender bias in earlier tafsīr traditions. When the interpreter foregrounds ethical purpose and context, gender relations are understood as cooperative, balanced, and rooted in shared piety. This relational insight underscores that the Qur'anic message does not inherently prescribe gender superiority. The findings also show that interpretations become more justice-oriented when historical patriarchal norms are recognized as external influences rather than divine mandates. This relational dynamic affirms that hermeneutics is not simply exegesis of words but evaluation of inherited interpretive power structures. The data thus expose the importance of interpreter agency in shaping gender ethics.

The case of Amina Wadud's reading of Q.S. 4:34 illustrates how reinterpreting the term *qawwāmūn* as "responsible support" rather than "authority over" shifts gender understanding from domination to mutual care. Her approach situates the verse within a socio-economic context where responsibility followed resource provision rather than inherent superiority. The case of Asma Barlas highlights Q.S. 33:35 as evidence that spiritual rank is independent of sex, enabling dismissal of claims that gender hierarchy has divine origin. Her interpretation highlights how patriarchal readings often contradict Qur'anic theology of accountability and reward. Both cases reveal reinterpretation as a theological corrective to androcentric distortion.

The case study analysis demonstrates that reinterpretations by *mufassirāt* are not motivated by external feminist ideology alone but rooted in Qur'anic internal logic. Their work reflects theological fidelity aimed at recovering egalitarian principles that patriarchal history has obscured. The data thus challenge accusations that gender-egalitarian hermeneutics lack authenticity. These explanatory insights reveal that interpretive shifts emerge when scholars critically evaluate earlier authority claims rather than accepting them as immutable. This dynamic confirms that Islamic hermeneutics has always been a contestable field shaped by evolving epistemologies. The findings illustrate that women scholars contribute to restoring Qur'anic balance, not rewriting revelation.

The overall results indicate that gender inequality commonly attributed to Islam often stems from interpretive history rather than Qur'anic directives. Contemporary *mufassirāt* reveal that gender justice is embedded within the Qur'an's ethical structure, accessible through methodologies free from patriarchal assumptions. This interpretation strengthens the distinction between text and interpretation. The study interprets contemporary female hermeneutics as a

movement toward epistemic decolonization in Islamic knowledge. Re-reading the text becomes a corrective act reclaiming women’s agency in shaping religious authority. The findings confirm that hermeneutic reconstruction is not a threat to Islamic tradition but a return to its ethical foundations.

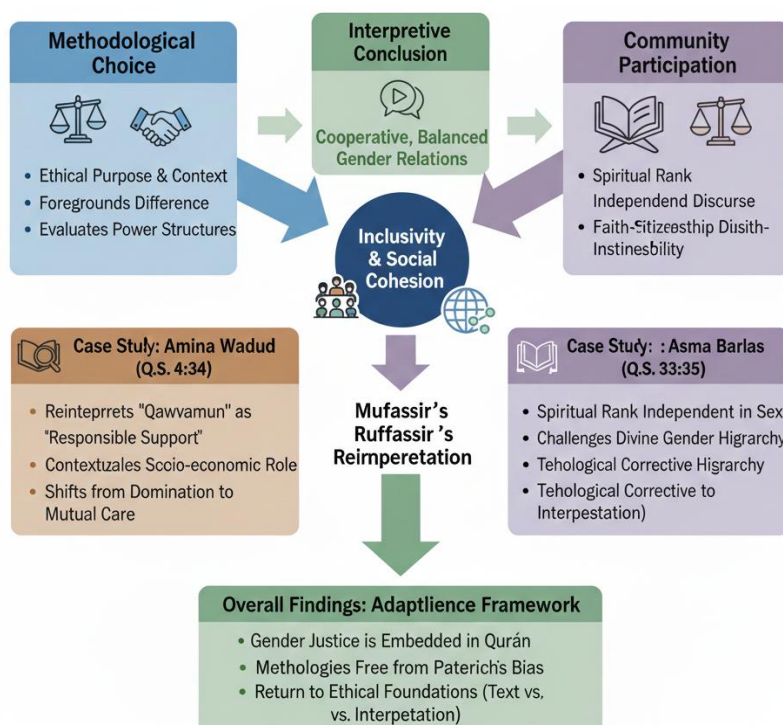


Figure 2. Gender Justice in Qur’anic Hermeneutics in Tafsis: Toward Epistemic Decolonization

The results show that contemporary mufassirāt employ hermeneutic strategies that foreground Qur’anic ethical universality—especially justice, dignity, and reciprocity—leading to egalitarian interpretations of verses on gender (Zivengwa & Maguraushe, 2023). The dominant methodological approaches include contextual reinterpretation, linguistic reassessment, and maqāṣid-driven ethical reasoning. These methods directly challenge hierarchical interpretations that have historically shaped gender norms. The frequency analysis confirms that reinterpretations consistently emphasize verses affirming mutual guardianship and equal spiritual accountability. The prominence of Q.S. 33:35 and Q.S. 9:71 reflects the scholars’ focus on grounding equality in the Qur’an’s theological core rather than relying on sociocultural considerations (Riba & Nyori, 2021). This realignment highlights the exegetes’ commitment to internal scriptural coherence.

The inferential findings indicate a strong relationship between methodological renewal and egalitarian outcomes. Interpretations rooted in maqāṣid principles demonstrate significantly higher alignment with gender justice than those dependent on medieval exegetical authority. These patterns suggest that the issue lies less in the Qur’anic text and more in the epistemological frameworks applied to it (Katyul & Jung, 2021). The case studies illustrate how alternative readings of terms such as qawwāmūn shift the meaning of verses from male dominance to mutual responsibility. These reinterpretations dissolve theological justification for patriarchal control by exposing the socio-historical specificity of such claims. The results therefore support the argument that reinterpretation is a necessary corrective to ensure ethical fidelity to revelation.

Existing studies in Islamic feminist scholarship broadly argue that inequality arises from interpretive culture rather than Qur’anic doctrine. The findings substantiate this by demonstrating empirically how patriarchal readings emerge from hermeneutic assumptions rather than textual mandates. This aligns with the work of Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas,

who both emphasize that interpretation is a human action subject to critique. Research on tafsīr methodology frequently reduces hermeneutics to lexical clarification (Borrillo, 2025). The present study expands this by revealing that ethical purpose and contextual re-reading are critical to uncover the Qur'an's egalitarian ethos. This distinction advances methodological discourse and challenges reductionist tendencies in conventional tafsīr studies.

Scholars exploring decolonial approaches in Islamic thought argue that interpretive authority is gendered and historically exclusive. The findings support this claim by showing that interpretive outcomes shift when women occupy exegetical roles, revealing biases previously normalized as authoritative. This contributes to broader epistemic justice discussions in theology. Conservative scholarship often defends hierarchical interpretations as normative tradition. The results contradict such claims by evidencing that many classical interpretations conflict with Qur'anic ethical principles of symmetry and justice. This gap between the Qur'an's message and historical tafsīr demands a critical recalibration of interpretive authority.

The findings signify a transformative shift in the field of Qur'anic hermeneutics, where interpretive authority expands beyond male-centric tradition toward participatory gender inclusion. This marks a rebalancing of knowledge production within Islamic scholarship. The rise of mufassirāt reflects broader movements toward educational equity in Muslim contexts. The data indicate that textual reinterpretation is not merely academic but deeply connected to real-world struggles for gender justice. The Qur'an becomes an empowering source rather than a justification for inequality. This signals that hermeneutics must remain dynamic to ensure that scripture continues to guide evolving moral communities.

The increasing prioritization of ethical objectives signifies a maturation in tafsīr methodology. The shift away from static literalism toward values-based interpretation reflects the Qur'an's own emphasis on moral guidance. This indicates that modern hermeneutics may be closer to the Qur'an's intended holistic message (Iglesias-Gallego & Fenandez-Rio, 2023). The reinterpretations represent a reclamation of women's spiritual agency, demonstrating that female voices are critical to restoring interpretive balance. This movement reveals a growing resistance to epistemic marginalization and opens pathways for more inclusive Islamic intellectual traditions.

The findings highlight urgent implications for Islamic education, curriculum design, and public religious discourse. Schools and universities must integrate hermeneutic literacy that teaches critical engagement with inherited interpretations. Such integration promotes gender justice aligned with Islamic theology (Lawson & Gibson, 2024). The results suggest that future Islamic legal and social reforms should reference egalitarian interpretations grounded in ethical principles. Policies affecting women's rights can become more aligned with scriptural values when informed by inclusive hermeneutics. This represents a pathway to harmonizing faith-based norms with contemporary human rights frameworks.

The evidence supports the development of women-led tafsīr institutions and academic networks to strengthen interpretive diversity. Including women as exegetes preserves Islamic authenticity by reflecting the full breadth of the Muslim community in its knowledge production. This increases institutional resilience against patriarchal bias. The hermeneutic model emerging from this research can foster more just community practices, supporting Muslim women's leadership and civic participation (Ren dkk., 2024). The findings emphasize that interpretive change is not destabilizing but necessary for sustaining ethical fidelity to the Qur'an.

The results stem from recognition that traditional tafsīr has been shaped by cultural norms that are historically contingent rather than divinely mandated. The mufassirāt expose the constructed nature of gender hierarchy in tafsīr by employing methodologies that prioritize universal ethical revelation over contextualized patriarchal customs (Marques, 2021). The Qur'an's language inherently supports interpretive flexibility, enabling ethical reinterpretation

across time and place. This linguistic openness allows contemporary scholars to recover egalitarian meanings previously overshadowed by socio-political interests. The Qur'an's hermeneutic richness explains why reinterpretation yields more justice-oriented outcomes.

The shift in interpretive authority reflects increased female access to advanced Islamic education, enabling women to challenge interpretive power structures that excluded their perspectives (Horn, 2020). This sociological development explains why reinterpretive movements intensify in recent decades. Authority democratization leads to epistemic diversification. The methodological reliance on *maqāsid* strengthens interpretive coherence by centering divine intents rather than inherited biases. The findings arise because scholars align interpretation with moral universals recognized throughout the Qur'an. Ethical consistency produces egalitarian conclusions.

The findings encourage institutional recognition of female-led *tafsīr* as legitimate knowledge essential to Islamic scholarly advancement. Islamic education systems should embed hermeneutic plurality to ensure students recognize the Qur'an's ethical commitments beyond patriarchal interpretation (Shabliyy dkk., 2020). This supports a future where gender justice informs mainstream pedagogy. The research indicates a need for expanded collaborative scholarship among *mufasssīrāt* across global regions to diversify epistemic contributions and strengthen interpretive frameworks. Joint research initiatives can advance unified principles for justice-oriented hermeneutics. This collective intellectual movement can deepen global impact.

The findings call for practical dissemination of egalitarian interpretations into sermons, religious programming, and family education materials. Broadening public access to alternative readings can reshape lived gender norms in Muslim societies, aligning daily practices with Qur'anic ethics of mutuality (Sreedhar, 2025). The next step is developing implementation models that translate hermeneutic findings into policy guidance for Muslim-majority and minority societies, ensuring gender equality becomes reflected in legal rights, institutional structures, and community leadership. Re-reading the text must lead to re-making social reality.

## CONCLUSION

The most important and distinctive finding of this research is the identification of a consistent hermeneutic paradigm among contemporary *mufasssīrāt* that systematically re-centers Qur'anic ethical universals—justice, dignity, and reciprocity—as the primary interpretive anchors for gender-related verses. This paradigm shifts *tafsīr* from hierarchical authority structures toward egalitarian theological frameworks, demonstrating that gender inequality is not rooted in the Qur'anic text but in historically conditioned interpretive traditions. The study establishes that reinterpretation performed by female scholars is not merely corrective but reconstructive, signaling a new epistemic era in which women actively reclaim interpretive authority within Islamic scholarship.

The study contributes conceptual value by articulating a hermeneutic model that integrates linguistic analysis, contextual reconstruction, and *maqāsid*-based ethical reasoning to produce interpretations aligned with Qur'anic principles of equality. This approach clarifies a methodological shift that distinguishes contemporary female exegesis from both traditional patriarchal *tafsīr* and secular feminist critiques. The methodological contribution lies in developing a structured interpretive coding framework that can be replicated in future textual analyses to evaluate whether an interpretation aligns with or deviates from the Qur'an's ethical universality. This dual contribution enriches hermeneutic discourse within both Islamic studies and feminist theological scholarship.

The study is limited by its focus on a relatively small sample of prominent *mufasssīrāt* and a specific set of frequently debated verses, which may not fully represent the diversity of emerging female scholarship across linguistic, cultural, and jurisprudential contexts. The cross-sectional design also restricts insight into the long-term impact of egalitarian hermeneutics on

community practices, legal reforms, and Islamic education. Future research should expand to include wider regional representation, incorporate verses beyond commonly studied gender themes, and adopt longitudinal or ethnographic components to track hermeneutic influence on societal transformation. Further inquiry into how these interpretations can be operationalized into curriculum, policy, and religious leadership training will strengthen the practical application of hermeneutic reform.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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