

ZAYNAB AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S EXEGESIS AND CONTRIBUTION TO GENDER EQUITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Ajeng Indira Dewi¹, Muh. Fathoni Hasyim¹,
Nor Salimah Abu Mansor², Sanuri¹, Imroatul Azizah¹ and
Yuanda Kusuma³

¹UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia, ²Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia and ³UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, Indonesia

Corresponding author: Ajeng Indira Dewi, email: ajedewi@gmail.com

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Abstract: Gender discrimination remains deeply entrenched in societal structures, often perpetuated by cultural and religious frameworks. This article seeks to address this issue by examining the contributions of Zaynab al-Ghazālī, one of the few female scholars in the traditionally male-dominated field of Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*). Her magnum opus, *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh*, offers a distinctive interpretative framework on gender equity, specifically regarding the ontology of women, their creation, and the concept of *qiwāmah* within the family structure. This study employs qualitative library research with a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on historical, sociological, and philosophical perspectives. To examine al-Ghazālī's thought, it applies the gender paradigms proposed by M. Quraish Shihab and Hussein Muhammad. The findings reveal that al-Ghazālī views gender equity as a core principle within an Islamic framework. Her interpretations reflect a moderate-progressive stance that bridges classical Islamic thought and contemporary gender discourse. This study contributes to the broader discourse on women's role in Islamic scholarship and underscores the necessity of recognizing female exegetes in shaping the intellectual and theological landscape of gender studies in Islam.

Keywords: Zaynab al-Ghazālī; *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh*; Exegesis; Gender Equity.

Introduction

Analyzing the dynamics of gender relations and partnerships as articulated in the Qur'ān and related Islamic texts inevitably leads to diverse interpretations. This divergence can be attributed to two primary factors. The first is intrinsic to the texts themselves—specifically, the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth—which are characterized by their global (pluralistic) and polysemic nature.¹ The second factor is extrinsic, arising from the personal preferences of the *mufassir*,² as well as the varying political, economic, social, and cultural contexts that shape the *mufassir*'s interpretative paradigm.³

Regarding the role of female exegetes (*mufassirat*), women's contributions to Qur'ānic exegesis remain underrepresented in historical literature and *tabaqat al-tafsīr* across both classical and modern periods. However, a closer examination reveals significant contributions by female scholars in the field of Qur'ānic interpretation.⁴ One such prominent figure, discussed in this study, is Zaynab al-Ghazālī, a *mufassirah* from Egypt, known for her magnum opus *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh*. This study explores several key aspects of her work. First, it examines the historical context of her life and the socio-political conditions that shaped her scholarship. Second, it analyzes al-Ghazālī's exegetical insights on the existence and nature of women, the creation of women, and the concept of *qiwāmah* within the family structure as presented in *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh*. Finally, the study categorizes al-Ghazālī's interpretative framework concerning gender-related verses in the Qur'ān.

Numerous studies have examined al-Ghazālī and her perspectives on gender issues. For instance, Arina Al-Ayya's research highlights how al-Ghazālī's construction of gender relations emphasizes equity, deliberately avoiding bias toward either men or women.⁵

¹ Riffat Hassan, "Teologi Perempuan dalam Tradisi Islam: Sejarah di Hadapan Allah," *Ulumul Qur'an: Jurnal Ilmu dan Kebudayaan* 1, no. 4 (1990): 49.

² Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

³ Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender* (Jakarta: Paramadina Publishers, 2001), 265-299.

⁴ Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Qira'ah Mubadalah* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2019), 480-481.

⁵ Arina Al-Ayya, "Konstruksi Relasi Gender dalam Tafsir al-Qur'an (Telaah Kitab *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh* karya Zainab al-Ghazālī Al-Jubaili)," in *Proceedings of the*

Similarly, Rohmad and Nashwan Abdo Khaled assess four specific issues discussed in *Naṣarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*, namely the implications of the testimony of two women, polygamy, inheritance rights, and the concept of *qiwāmah*.⁶ Nur Ainun Tanjung further investigates al-Ghazālī's interpretations of Qur'ānic verses of al-Nisā' [4]: 34 and 128, arguing that her exegesis reflects a balanced and impartial approach to gender.⁷ This study distinguishes itself from previous research through its distinct theoretical frameworks, specific textual focus, and the particular Qur'ānic verses it examines, aiming to elucidate both the theoretical and practical implications of al-Ghazālī's interpretations while underscoring their relevance to contemporary women's humanitarian issues.

The significance of this research is twofold. Academically, the contributions and participation of Muslim women in Qur'ānic interpretation remain significantly underrepresented. This is evident in the fact that only two scholarly works explicitly recognize women as Qur'ānic exegetes. The first, *Mu'jam al-Mufassirin: min Ṣadr al-Islām ḥattā al-'Aṣr al-Hādir*,⁸ mentions Zayb al-Nisā' al-Mākir from India, credited with *Tafsīr Zayb; al-Tafsīr fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. The second, *al-Mufassirūn: Hayātuhum wa Manhajuhum*,⁹ introduces an Iranian *mufassirah*, Nuṣrat Begum Amīn, the author of *Makhzan al-Irfān*. From an empirical standpoint, data from the *Global Gender Gap* report, encompassing research conducted between 2006 and 2024, indicates that gender disparities persist across various societal dimensions, with projections suggesting that achieving full gender parity may take approximately 134 years.¹⁰

National Conference on Gender and Social Movements 1, no. 1 (2022): 574-586. <https://proceedings.radenfatah.ac.id/index.php/kggs/article/view/376/215>.

⁶ Rohmad and Nashwan Abdo Khaled, "Qaḍāyā al-Mar'ah al-Ijtima'iyyah al-Hadīthah 'Inda Zaynab al-Ghazālī fī Tafsīrihā 'Naṣarāt fī Kitāb Allāh,'" *Studia Quranika* 4, no. 2 (2019): 201-221.

⁷ Nur Ainun Tanjung, Yenni Rahman, and Muhammad Ikhwan, "Penafsiran Nusyūz dalam Tafsir Naṣarāt fī Kitāb Allāh," *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Furqan: Al-qur'an, Bahasa dan Seni* 6, no. 2 (2020): 112-125.

⁸ 'Ādil Nuwayhiḍ, *Mu'jam al-Mufassirin: Min Ṣadr al-Islām wa Ḥattā al-'Aṣr al-Hādir* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Nuwayhiḍ al-Thaqāfiyah, 1988).

⁹ Muhammad 'Alī 'Iyāzī, *al-Mufassirūn Hayātuhum wa Manhajuhum* (Tehran: Mu'assasat al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa al-Irshād al-Islāmī, n.d.), 629-633.

¹⁰ Kusum Kali Pal et al., *Global Gender Gap Report 2024* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2024), 5. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf

The research adopts a library-based methodology, employing a descriptive-analytical approach comprised of historical, philosophical, and sociological dimensions. The historical approach aims to critically analyze the antecedents that motivated al-Ghazālī to articulate her views on women in her *tafsīr*, *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh*. Meanwhile, the philosophical approach traces al-Ghazālī's paradigm by examining how and what is behind the originality of her thought, then looking for the fundamental structure of the thought. The sociological approach considers the societal conditions, prevailing cultural norms, and institutional frameworks during al-Ghazālī's era, particularly in terms of gender equity. Meanwhile, in categorizing al-Ghazālī's paradigm as reflected in her *tafsīr*, two theoretical frameworks will serve as the analytical foundation: M. Quraish Shihab in his work *Perempuan: Dari Cinta Sampai Seks, dari Nikah Mut'ah Sampai Nikah Sunnah, dari Bias Lama Sampai Bias Baru*¹¹ and Husein Muhammad's paradigm in his book *Perempuan, Islam dan Negara: Pergulatan Identitas dan Entitas*.¹²

The Life and Intellectual Heritage of Zaynab al-Ghazālī

Zaynab Muhammād al-Ghazālī was born in the village of Mayit Ya'ish, Daqahliyah region of Egypt on January 2, 1917. Her lineage traces back to significant Islamic figures: her father, Muhammād al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī, was an Azharite scholar connected to the second caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, while her mother was a descendant of Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Abī Tālib.¹³ When al-Ghazālī was 12 years old, she successfully passed the exam to attend a government school for female students. Apart from attending school, al-Ghazālī also engaged in religious studies with several Azharite scholars (*mashāyikh*), including Shaykh 'Alī Maḥfūz (head of the teaching and advisory department) of al-Azhar, Shaykh Muhammād Sulaymān al-Najār and Shaykh 'Abd al-Majīd al-Lubbān. It was from the

¹¹ M. Quraish Shihab, *Perempuan: Dari Cinta Sampai Seks, Dari Nikah Mut'ah Sampai Nikah Sunnah, dari Bias Lama Sampai Bias Baru* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2005), 29 and 257.

¹² Husein Muhammad, *Perempuan, Islam dan Negara: Pergulatan Identitas dan Entitas* (Yogyakarta: Qalam Nusantara, 2016), 120-121.

¹³ Ummi Zainab Mohd Ghazali and Muhammad Azizan Sabjan, "Zainab Al-Ghazali: A History of Mujahidah Awakening in Egypt," in *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences* 89, no. 660 (2020).

women-only school and her time with the shaykhs of al-Azhar that al-Ghazālī managed to combine modern and traditional disciplines.¹⁴

In 1936, when al-Ghazālī was 19 years old, she joined a modern women's organization led by Hudā Shāfi‘ī, the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU). This organization supported women's liberation championed by Western thought and trends, so it often clashed with Azharite scholars. Huda Shāfi‘ī was known as a fearless and strong leader and aggressively advocated for women's rights in society.¹⁵ Al-Najjār was one of the Azharite scholars responsible for conveying the interpretation of women's rights to al-Ghazālī.¹⁶ He emphasized the importance of self-respect and dignity for women, urging that a proper understanding of Islam was crucial for advocating their rights. As al-Ghazālī gradually became disillusioned with the direction of the EFU, she came to believe that the majority of EFU members were opposed to Islamic guidelines in interpreting the role of women in society. This prompted her to leave the feminist union despite the potential for a prominent future within its ranks.

The beginning of al-Ghazālī joining Ikhwanul Muslimin was when she met Shaykh Ḥasan al-Bannā in 1941. Al-Bannā pledged her's allegiance to participate in the struggle with Ikhwanul Muslimin because they shared the same vision and mission.¹⁷ In 1948, al-Ghazālī officially joined Ikhwanul Muslimin and led one of the divisions within the organization. In 1965, al-Ghazālī was arrested by the government on charges of being involved in a case within Ikhwanul Muslimin. She was sentenced to 25 years in prison, during which she endured hard labor and torture. She documented her experiences in her memoir entitled *Ayyām Min Hayātī*.¹⁸ In August 1971, after serving six years in prison, with the help of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, a decree was issued by the Anwar Sadat's government to release al-Ghazālī from prison.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 270-277.

¹⁵ Herry Mohammad, *Tokoh-Tokoh Islam yang Berpengaruh Abad 20* (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2006), 307.

¹⁶ Ghazali and Sabjan, "Zainab Al-Ghazali," 666-667.

¹⁷ Mohammad, *Tokoh-Tokoh Islam yang Berpengaruh Abad 20*, 307.

¹⁸ Ghazali and Sabjan, "Zainab al-Ghazali," 670.

¹⁹ Syaikh Muhammad Sa‘id Mursi, *Tokoh-Tokoh Besar Islam Sepanjang Sejarah*, trans. Khoirul Amru Harapan (Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, 2007), 467.

Al-Ghazālī passed away on August 3, 2005 at the age of 88, after her health deteriorated to the point that she lost her eyesight.²⁰ Among al-Ghazālī's works are *Ayyām Min Ḥayātī*, *Naẓarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*, *Nahw Ba'th Jadid*, *Ilā Ibrātī*, *Naẓarāt fī al-Dīn wa al-Ḥayāh*, *Sharḥ al-Arba'in al-Nabawiyah*, *Mushkilāt al-Shabāb wa al-Fatayāt fī Marḥalat al-Murāḥaqah*.²¹

The socio-political conditions at the beginning of the 20th century influenced al-Ghazālī's engagement with the challenges facing Islamic society, as well as her interpretative approach to the Qur'ān, which she wrote her book, *Naẓarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*. At that time, Egypt was experiencing external and internal challenges. Externally, the country was facing the pressures of Western colonialism impacting Islamic nations. Internally, Egypt was in a state of turmoil under the leadership of King Faruq compounded by a decline in educational standards²² and an increase in extreme group fanaticism.²³ These prevailing conditions prompted al-Ghazālī to engage actively in demonstrations and find solutions for Muslims through movements, lectures and her works. Her efforts were aimed at revitalizing the values of the Qur'ān for Muslims as *hudan* (guidance) for all problems.

There are two social approaches taken by al-Ghazālī to *jihād* not only in the form of fighting or a movement, but also critical thinking and adding insight. The first is more concerned with the correlation between human problems and Islamic teachings or sharia. Second, she sought to rejuvenate the foundational essence of the Qur'ān by bringing back *da'wah* activities that are considered to have begun to fade in society, especially Muslim women at that time.²⁴

²⁰ Zainab and Sabjan, "Zainab al-Ghazali," 660.

²¹ Tanjung, Rahmad, and Ikhwan, "Penafsiran Nusyuz dalam Tafsir Naẓarāt fī Kitāb Allāh," 116.

²² Lailatul Huda and Dwi Susanto, "Siti Walidah, Gender Equality and Modernist Islamic Women's Movement in Indonesia: A Critical History," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 18, no. 1 (September, 2023): 28-49.

²³ Retno Prayudi and Abd. Hamid, *Wanita Ahli Tafsir Abad Modern* (Sukabumi: Haura Utama, 2023), 76-77.

²⁴ Ibid.

Nazarat fi Kitab Allah: An Overview of the Magnum Opus

The writing of *Nazarat fi Kitab Allah* began when al-Ghazalī was in prison. Initially, she wrote her *tafsir* as notes within the margins of the Qur'ān's *mushaf* sheets. However, the Qur'ān was eventually confiscated by prison authorities, leaving her unable to complete it. Only after her release, she resumed writing her *tafsir*.²⁵ The writing of this *tafsir* was completed by al-Ghazalī in the early 90s. The first volume contains interpretations on *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* [1] to Ibrāhīm [14], and was printed and published by the Dār al-Šurūq Company in 1994. Then in 2010, the second volume, covering from *Sūrah al-Hijr* [15] to al-Nās [114], published by Dār al-Tawzī' wa al-Nashr al-Islāmīyah. Notably, this second volume was published four years posthumously after al-Ghazalī's death.²⁶

In writing *Nazarat fi Kitab Allah*, al-Ghazalī refers to several books of *tafsir* including Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsir al-Qur'ān al-'Azīz*, Sayyid Quṭb's *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, al-Qurtūbī's *al-Jāmi' li al-Āhkām al-Qur'ān*, Ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* and al-Rāzī's *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb*.²⁷ She also quotes many traditions narrated by Ṣahīḥ Bukhārī, Muslim, Ahmād, Tirmidhī, and Ibn Mājah. Although the citation of the ḥadīth in the interpretation of *Nazarat fi Kitab Allah* does not include the *sanad*, al-Ghazalī directly explains the status of the ḥadīth as explained in the preamble of her interpretation that she interprets only based on *sahīh* traditions.²⁸

The source of interpretation in this work is *bi al-iqti'rān* (a combination of *bi al-ma'thur* and *bi al-ma'qūl*), but more on gender verses is more dominant *bi al-ra'y* (*bi al-ma'qūl*). While in terms of the explanation approach, the method used in the *tafsir* followed *bayānī*. The scope of the explanation of *Nazarat fi Kitab Allah* is *ijmāli*. The order

²⁵ Siti Zaharah Hamid, Farhah Zaidar Mohamed Ramli, and Phayilah Yama, "Sumbangan Zainab al-Ghazali dalam Memartabatkan Kedudukan Wanita dalam Arena Kepemimpinan Umat Islam," in *Proceeding of International Conference on Post-graduate Research* (ICPR 2014) (Selangor: Center of Postgraduate Studies, Selangor International Islamic University College [KUIS], 2014): 269-277. <https://conference.uis.edu.my/icpr/2014/eproceedings/29.%20Siti%20Zaharah%20Hamid.pdf>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Zaynab al-Ghazalī al-Jubaylī, *Nazarat fi Kitab Allah*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1994), 12.

²⁸ Ibid.

of the verses interpreted is in *tablīlī*, while for the style of this *tafsīr* book includes three styles, namely *adabī ijtimā'ī*, *ḥarakī* and *tarbawī*.

In its *muqaddimah* (introduction) section, 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Farmāwī, the *muḥaqqaq* (editor) of this book, provides a preface that contains his assessment of al-Ghazālī and this book. Al-Farmāwī explains some of the characteristics and interpretive *manhaj* (method) used by al-Ghazālī in this book (*ijtimā'ī*, *ḥarakī* and *tarbawī*).²⁹ a) Facilitating a profound interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses and defining their meanings in simple language; b) Providing a correlation of the meaning of the verse with the realities of life; c) Focusing on the aspect of implementing actions in accordance with Islam, which is enforced through fostering three components of society, involving each individual Muslim, the Muslim family unit (family members) and the empowerment of Muslim women; d) Prioritizing *da'wah* in order to revive all the obligations of Islam that have faded away based on two pillar things: God's law and the obligation of *jihād fī sabil Allāh*; e) In her *tafsīr*, al-Ghazālī advises us to increase our supplication to the God by praying with a heart full of faith and belief that the God will fulfill His promises, whether good or bad; f) al-Ghazālī relied on authentic ḥadīths to complement her interpretation, incorporating ḥadīths and providing additional explanations and analogies that align with the purpose and meaning of the Qur'ānic verses. Al-Farmāwī explained:

Zaynab al-Ghazālī was a *mujahidah dā'iyah* whose entire life was spent with the Book of the God, in the sweet and bitter moments of her life. She lived when the Qur'ān was recited to her, read in order to understand what it contained, accustomed herself and shaped her situation to always adhere to what she had understood. These things made her have a sincere desire to present what she understood and to simplify what she found in the book of the God, which is light and guidance to Muslim women.³⁰

The Ontology of Women in the Qur'ān

There are at least three verses that will become a platform or foundation for thinking when discussing the existence of women in

²⁹ Ibid., 6-8.

³⁰ Al-Jubaylī, *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh*, 5-6.

the Qur'ān related to gender equality, namely Āli 'Imrān [3]: 195, al-Tawbah [9]: 71, and al-An'ām [6]: 165.

Āli 'Imrān [3]: 195

Al-Ghazālī interpreted the verse as follows:³¹

Indeed, among the greatness of the God is that He is the Most Just, the Most Righteous, who will never waste the deeds of His servants, both men and women. The verse "Some of you are more than others" implies equality and the glorification of women and men together. The God has made them the essence of complete humanity, He has entrusted the management of creation in general to both of them, and He has imposed upon them the obligation to follow the laws of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and together with him to bear the *amānah* and convey the message of religion.

Then the God raised the status of those who came forward for *Jihād* from among men and women, and they migrated in the way of the God. They endured all the hardships on the way, even if they were expelled from their hometowns. Likewise, they received various unfavorable treatments from the disbelievers and *zālim*. Then, by the God's reward, the foundations of their evil were removed, and they were admitted to Paradise, where rivers flow down, and the best reward from His side was given to them.

When examining the interpretation above, it becomes evident that there is no element of gender bias. On the contrary, it underscores the Qur'ānic argument for gender equity through the phrase "*some of you are part of others*," which affirms the equal honor bestowed upon both women and men. This suggests that as creations of the God, both genders share the inherent dignity of being human, and their elevation in status is determined by their character and deeds—particularly through *jihād* and migration in the path of the God.

Al-Ghazālī further emphasizes in her *tafsīr* the necessity of co-operation and partnership between men and women in upholding the Prophet Muḥammad's teachings, fulfilling *amānah*, and conveying the message of Islam. At the outset of her interpretation, she asserts that the good deeds of both men and women will never be disregarded by the God. Moreover, toward the conclusion of her

³¹ Al-Jubaylī, *Nazārat fī Kitāb Allāh*, 278.

exegesis, she highlights that their *jihād*—whether performed by men or women—is rewarded with divine forgiveness and the promise of Paradise. This signifies that any righteous action undertaken by either gender will yield positive outcomes in both this world and the hereafter. Thus, according to al-Ghazālī, an individual's status or worth is not determined by gender, but by their sincerity in implementing the laws of the God and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Al-Tawbah [9]: 71

Al-Ghazālī's interpretation of this verse:³²

Indeed, the decree of the God, which states that “Those who believe, both men and women, some of them are partners to others,” is an explanation of the urgency of unity and oneness among Muslims. When, groups within the Muslim community differ in their thoughts and opinions, it can potentially undermine the collective efforts of others and weaken their spirit. The early Muslims did not help the Messenger of the God except because they were like a bracelet of jewelry around the wrist. Thus, the first obligation that the caller of the *ummah* or Muhammad enjoined upon the devout Muslims was to unite their ranks and make every effort to eliminate the divisions, defections and disputes that could fracture the *ummah*, thus weakening their unity and eliminating their strength.

In al-Ghazālī's interpretation of this verse, the emphasis lies in the notion that men and women are allies and partners who must strengthen their unity and solidarity. Faithful Muslims are urged to consolidate their ranks and exert all possible efforts to eliminate divisions and discrimination between genders, as both are equally responsible for fostering cohesion within the Muslim community.

From the two verses that discuss the relationship between men and women and emphasize their equity, it can be concluded that the God has honored both genders without distinction or inequality. In the eyes of the God, all humans are equal as His servants, and the true measure of one's worth is not gender but the sincerity and dedication to performing good deeds and striving in His cause. Such efforts are rewarded with divine forgiveness and the promise of Paradise. Thus, distinction is based not on gender but on one's com-

³² Al-Jubaylī, *Nazarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*, 573.

mitment to upholding Islamic teachings. For both men and women, harmonious cooperation and partnership are essential in strengthening the unity of the *ummah*, particularly in carrying out *amr ma'rūf nahi munkar*.

Al-An'ām [6]: 165

When discussing the position of humans, whether male or female, in the Qur'ān, a significant verse that designates them as *khalifah* on earth is found in al-An'ām [6]: 165. The following presents al-Ghazālī's interpretation of this verse:³³

It is the God who has made you rulers on the surface of the earth, while entrusting His message to you. You are to prosper it from one generation to the next, from one time to another, from one phase to another and from one group to another. The concept of assigning of human beings as leaders on the surface of the earth is an obvious knowledge. Indeed, the God has made them *khalifah* on the surface of the earth and sheltered them therein.

The God also raises the status of some people and makes them superior to others in terms of wealth and morals. This is because of the wisdom and reasons that the God imparts to them. Similarly, the God also exalts some others in terms of morals, shape or form, color and degree. Behind it all, the God tucked certain wisdom as He said "We raised the degrees of some of them above others in degrees so that some of them may learn from others".

The God is the all-powerful, all-living, all-dead One who created you, O mankind, and made you powerful in prospering the earth with creation, vegetation, trade and industry. No group will prosper except through charity and faith. In fact, faith alone is insufficient and has little value on its own. However, charity based on faith is ultimately an absolute requirement for humans to prosper the earth and everything in it. It is the implementation of the apostolate perfectly, so thus a lazy people will never progress. Likewise, individuals who are not creative will never develop. Therefore, a creative hand is a hand that is favored by the God and His Messenger, in notation that the hand actually works. He will have friends, his heart will be calm before the God, be pleased with his provisions, fulfill his *shi'ar*, maximize devotion to him, spread out on earth to seek his sustenance, and seek peace and prosperity in the world instead of destruction.

³³ Al-Jubaylī, *Nazarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*, 464.

Just as the God has placed you in various stages and degrees, some of which differ from others. In terms of position, wealth, business, knowledge, some become bodyguards, while others become ministers, some become kings, and others become leaders, some become judges, while some are the ones being judged. All of them, when related to the God, are His servants who will be held accountable, and will be judged. The most honorable among them is the one who *taqwa* to the God the most. Therefore, the standard of goodness is faith, *taqwa* and good deeds.

The God will fairly reward all the good that people have done. Conversely, whoever acts unjustly, then the God will judge and torture him because the God is the Quickest to Punish. If He wishes, then He will immediately hasten His punishment in the world so that His servant repents to Him. This is one of the forms of kindness that the God gives to the person concerned. Indeed, the God is the Most Forgiving and Most Merciful for those who always take care of themselves.

Verily, the God, to the repentant souls who regret their mistakes and seek forgiveness for their sins, is Forgiving and Merciful. Glory be to the God from what the polytheists attribute to Him. This is our Qur'ān, this is the guidance that the God has given to His believing servants, the people to whom the God has given the greatest gift in the history of humanity, the blessed scripture. Moreover, this is, without any doubt, one of the great blessings of the God towards His servants; praise be to Him alone.

Al-Ghazālī emphasizes in her interpretation of *Sūrah al-An‘ām* [6]: 165 that all human beings (men and women) have the *amānah* from the God to carry out His message, as *Khalīfah fī al-Ard*. This responsibility is realized by prospering the earth and its contents, from one generation to generation and adapted from one phase to another. Therefore, al-Ghazālī argues that human beings, whether male or female, are given advantages that differ from one another, both in terms of sustenance, morals, shape, appearance, color and degree, as well as in terms of position, wealth, effort, knowledge, and others. These things have wisdom or reasons that must be studied and used as *‘ibrāh*. The barometer of the quality and goodness of a person or group for al-Ghazālī is *sālih* deeds and faith, framed within the context of *taqwa*, which is a practice based on faith and can ultimately prosper the earth and everything in it. This is the implementation of the Prophet's message. One of the most concrete

forms is maximizing creativity and the absence of laziness. At the end of her interpretation, al-Ghazālī reminds us that any good done will be justly rewarded, while any form of injustice will be judged and punished. The God enjoins His servants who do wrong to repent immediately, for He loves those who repent and regret their mistakes, and ask forgiveness for their sins.

The Creation and Identity of Woman

The Qur'ānic verse commonly used as a basis for discussing human creation is al-Nisā' [4]: 1, particularly concerning gender issues related to the creation of women in the Qur'ān. Al-Ghazālī interprets this verse with the following explanation:³⁴

Indeed, men and women are one whole soul. The first part of the soul is the man, then the second part of the soul is the woman. This means that their lives complement each other. The god willed this world to be filled with life and existence, so He sent them through Adam and Eve with many of the male and female species, so that the mobilization of creatures on earth would nourish their lives.

The above verse actually affirms the life relationship that exists between men and women through lawful sexual relations, namely marriage. Both of them have many descendants, so that marriage is actually part of the Sharī'ah of the God and the rules that beautify their lives. Starting from the creation of the universe, until the end of time. That is the wisdom and will of the God.

Meanwhile, the God commands us as the descendants of Prophet Adam to always *taqwā* to Him, who has created us from nothing. Then move us to the realm of the womb as He has hinted to us. To His constant care for mankind, and He will count his deeds because He is the One who is the Guardian of Everything, and the God is the witness of all things.

According to the interpretation above, al-Ghazālī argues that women were created not from the ribs of men; instead, they come from the same soul as men do. Furthermore, men and women need each other, because all are God's creations are meant to complement and fulfill each other. Al-Ghazālī does not question the creation of women from ribs or not. Instead, she focuses on the verse's main message and substance, emphasizing the need for complete unity

³⁴ Al-Jubaylī, *Nazarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*, 281.

regarding the relationship between men and women. This unity is established through religious law in a marriage, where both need each other and complement each other, in accordance with the purpose of creation, which is to preserve life in the world. Because marriage is a rule to beautify the lives of men and women, not the other way around.

In essence, al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the creation of women shows gender equity, indicating that there is no apparent gender bias. According to her, women were created from one soul after the God created Adam, followed by the creation of Eve. Nevertheless, that does not imply that Eve was created from Adam. Clearly, this is an understanding that leads to discrimination and hegemony against women.

Reinterpreting *Qiwāmah* in al-Nisā' [4]: 34

Al-Ghazālī interpreted the verse *qiwāmah* found in *Surah al-Nisā'* [4]: 34 as follows:³⁵

In this verse is the God's decree that men are the protectors of women and that they have the right to leadership within the family. This does not mean emphasizing the woman's rights in her home, and her authority to do things related to her personal affairs in order to safeguard the interests of the family and maintain its unity.

The original meaning of leadership is basically as a caretaker. In the sense that a man is responsible for making a living for his wife and children, as well as being responsible for helping his wife to complete housework (domestic affairs). Based on the instructions of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, who is the role model of the family, essentially, the family is the first educational institution of the society. Meanwhile, the wife is the internal person in charge of this institution. She will be judged before the God for what she did for the safety of her husband and children.

This will not be achieved unless the wife embraces with longing, love, and obedience with the intention for the sake of the God alone. And she believes that the leadership of men over them is justice that He has outlined in order to obtain the benefit of their household life. The reason for this is that the position of leader requires men to be kind and proportional in interacting with women in everything they

³⁵ Al-Jubaylī, *Nazarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*, 297.

do in the context of service. Likewise, men must uphold the dignity and honor, as well as the humanity of the woman, because, through their intercession, the trust of the household can be maintained very well.

This moderate understanding of the term *qiwāmah* will make women trust their husbands and feel comfortable in their presence. Thus, household life can be safe and eternally. In this condition, the wife can also carry out her duties as a household assistant and can educate her children. Thus, through the bond of husband and wife, Islam wants to create a tree of life that blooms in a garden rich in beauty, which can be a shelter for those who are those in hot conditions. That is what home life is in Islam.

That is the role of men in the building of the household is fundamentally to sustain mutual happiness. So that the ship can still sail and contribute to the life of the community. This can be realized if it begins with a complete understanding of the Book of the God, who is the Most Just.

In relation to this issue, Ibn Kathīr states that a man is the protector of women. This means that he is their leader, organizer, and advisor when they make mistakes. The God tells us that what women fear is their disobedience towards their husbands. In this case, disobedience refers to a sense of superior over men, meaning the disobedient woman basically considers herself superior to her husband. Consequently, she is reluctant to obey his commands or hates him. Therefore, it is appropriate for men to teach them and warn them of the severity of the God's punishment when we advise them.

If she is not receptive to being taught and warned about her husband's rights, then choosing silence with her is the best option. This means that when she sleeps, the husband should turn his back on her and not have intercourse with her, as said by Ibn 'Abbās said. In the event that previous measures prove ineffective, then the husband may beat her with a gentle blow without harming her. Because the primary objective of this action is to persuade her to return from her disobedience, so that kind of a mild beating should suffice.

However, it must be underlined that this method of beating permitted, following the previous ineffective two methods of advising and silence, and it is very hurtful according to the woman's feelings. Related to this issue, the Prophet once commented while reading this verse (al-Nisā' [4]: 34) "And husbands should not beat their wives unless they have transgressed against you." However, the poor inter-

action of some husbands with their wives has resulted in a misinterpretation of the essence and spirit of this Islamic teaching.

If the wife repents, whether before or after these steps have been taken, in accordance with what the God and His messenger, there is no other way except to forgive her. It is not permissible for the husband to ignore her, let alone hit her. "Verily, the God is Most High, Most Great." This statement is a threat from the God against those who disobey His commands, whether it is a wife who disobeys her husband, or a husband who mistreats his wife. The God is the Reveal er and the Knower of hidden matters.

From al-Ghazālī's interpretation above, is evident that she posits men are both leaders and protectors of women, meaning that husbands are the leaders, protectors, caretaker and advisors of women when they make mistakes. According to al-Ghazālī, this leadership and protection does not necessarily negate a woman's authority in her home. This is particularly relevant when managing her personal affairs contributing to family welfare to preserve familial unity.

Male leadership characterized by responsibility, manifested through providing financial support for his wife's children and helping his wife to complete domestic chores. For al-Ghazālī, this is in accordance with the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muḥammad, who is a role model for the entire Muslim community. The leadership position described by al-Ghazālī necessitates that men exhibit kindness and proportionality in their interactions with women, in all matters, and with intended for devotion. Men must also maintain the women's dignity, honor and the humanity.

For al-Ghazālī, the family is considered the *madrasatul al-ūlā* or the first educational institution of the *ummah*, with the wife assuming the principal role. As the individual in charge, she will be judged regarding this primary task. Additionally, she must also be responsible for fostering comfort (*sakīnah*) for her husband and children. The wife must believe that the God has appointed men as leaders as an expression of justice from the God in order to foster the well-being of the family. In carrying out this primary duty, al-Ghazālī thinks the wife should be filled with pleasure, love and obedience with the intention for the sake of the God.

Moderation in the concept of *qiwāmah*, according to al-Ghazālī, emphasizes that men create trust and comfort in their relationships

with their wives. In this context, the role of men in building a household is to promote mutual happiness, thereby establishing *sakīnah* for each family member. Vice versa, the wife can feel safe and comfortable in carrying out her duties properly, including taking care of the family and educating her children. This reciprocal dynamic enables both spouses to create security and comfort. The house eventually becomes evolves into a sanctuary for all members during adversity, calamity, or trials, allowing each individual to make meaningful contributions to societal life.

Al-Ghazālī stated that one of the most common ways wives disobey their husbands is by feeling superior to them, which makes them reluctant to obey their commands or even resent them. It is the man's duty to teach them and warn them of the severity of God's punishment for doing so. When the wife commits *nushūz*, al-Ghazālī emphasizes three primary steps for the husband must do: first, to advise or teach about the consequences of her actions that she will be punished by the God; second, silence with her, which includes physically turning away from her during sleep and does not have intercourse with her; third, the husband may hit her with a soft blow without cause any harm to her. Importantly, this step serves solely as a last resort after the previous two methods, advising and silence, are ineffective. Regarding hitting, the Prophet saw. said, "Husbands should not hit their wives unless they have transgressed against them." Al-Ghazālī further elucidates that unscrupulous husbands often misuse the permissibility of hitting wives, leading to a misinterpretation of the command's nature and spirit.

The last message in the interpretation of this verse, al-Ghazālī advises both parties, male or female. For the husband, if the wife has repented, either before or after these stages, the husband must forgive her. It is no longer permissible for the husband to silence with her, act arbitrarily, let alone hit her. As mentioned at the end of this verse, for wives who disobey their husbands, that the God is the Highest, the Greatest issues a warning, as well as a threat to husbands or wives who violate the rules that have been explained.

Theoretical Insights from al-Ghazālī's Exegesis in *Nazarāt fī Kitāb Allāh*

As stated in the introduction, the analytical framework used to categorize al-Ghazālī's interpretation and paradigm in her book

Nazārat fi Kitāb Allāh bifurcated into two principal constructs: one formulated by M. Quraish Shihab, and the other by Hussein Muhammad. These two barometers are based on the source of interpretation and the *mufasir*'s paradigm towards verses with gender themes.

Utilizing the framework established by Shihab, which categorizes scholars' perspectives into three distinct groups—old biased views, new biased views, and moderate views—an analysis of al-Ghazālī's exegesis in *Nazārat fi Kitāb Allāh* reveals that she aligns with the moderate scholarly perspective. Likewise, Muhammad categorizes scholars' responses to gender issues into two distinct schools of thought: the conservative and the progressive. If followed the Muhammad's formula, al-Ghazālī's interpretation is categorized firmly within the progressive school of scholars.

The reason for the results is that al-Ghazālī's interpretation in her book *Nazārat fi Kitāb Allāh* are in accordance with the basic assumptions of moderate-progressive scholars, including: 1) there is a principal equity between men and women, with no subordination or hegemony between them; 2) the integrity and quality of both men and women are not based on gender but on faith and *'amal salīh*, framed within the context of *taqwā*, as well as mastered skills; 3) Men and women expected to complement, help and work together for mutual welfare and happiness without any form of exploitation, discrimination, intimidation or hegemony. These principles are substantiated by al-Ghazālī's interpretation of Āli 'Imrān [03]: 195, which explicitly states that the phrase “some of you are part of others” implies implies equity and mutual honor for both women and men, and the God made them the essence of complete humanism as well as the God entrusted both with the mandate of managing creation in general to both of them.

Similarly, in her interpretation of al-Anām [6]: 165, al-Ghazālī elucidates that the duty of humans (both men and women) is to be *khalifah fi al-ard*. This role entails prospering and maximizing their creativity to benefit society. Furthermore, she highlights that the noblest in the sight of the God—the standard of human goodness—is one who performs *salīh* deeds and maintains their belief, framed by *taqwā*. Likewise, when al-Tawbah [9]: 71 and al-Nisā' [4]: 34, al-Ghazālī emphasizes the unity and oneness of humans consisting of

men and women. She advocates for forming alliances and cooperating in partnerships, ensuring that roles and responsibilities align with Islamic law's teachings. This approach fosters harmony within the community, beginning at the smallest unit—the family. By recognizing and supporting each other's strengths and duties, every community member can contribute positively to society. It is essential for everyone to maintain strong faith in their respective positions and duties.

In al-Ghazālī's interpretation, no old or new bias is exhibited. Her religious understanding does not favor women over men, nor does it demand the equality of men and women, like the new bias view. Instead, it offers a perspective that balances these two opposing viewpoints. The progressive interpretation of al-Ghazālī's interpretation is further evidenced by the absence of views that subordinate women or elevate men as superior, or vice versa. Her exegesis consistently conveys equity between men and women. This is clearly reflected in her interpretation of Āli ‘Imrān [3]: 195, al-An‘ām [6]: 165, as well as al-Tawbah [9]: 71 and al-Nisā’ [4]: 34.

Al-Ghazalī's interpretation of the term *qawwām* aligns with other female exegetes like Kariman Hamzah, who defines *qawwām* as a caretaker in moral and material terms,³⁶ and Ḥannān Lahhām, who interprets *qawwām* harmoniously as protector and caregiver.³⁷ Zaynab b. ‘Abd al-Salām also considers *qawwām* to mean a protective caretaker,³⁸ while Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh's view that male leadership over women should not be autocratic or dictatorial but based on love, affection, and protective consultation.³⁹ Furthermore, when examining the views of Muslim feminists such as Naṣr

³⁶ Kariman Hamzah, *al-Lu’lu’ wa al-Marjān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shurūq al-Dawlīyah, 2010), 196.

³⁷ Ḥannān Lahhām, *Min Hadi’i Sūrah al-Nisā’* (Riyadh: Dār al-Hudā, 1989), 121–122.

³⁸ Zaynab ‘Abd al-Salām, *Inayat al-Qur’ān fī Huqūq al-Insān*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 2008), 370.

³⁹ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 5 (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyah al-‘Āmmah, 1990), 56.

Hāmid Abū Zayd,⁴⁰ Riffat Hassan,⁴¹ and Asghar Ali Engineer,⁴² there is a common thread with al-Ghazālī's interpretation. Fundamentally, *qawwām* implies support and protection, rather than exploitation or placing women in a subordinate position.

Practical Implications of al-Ghazālī's Thought on Gender Justice

Comparing the current state of affairs with that of at least a decade ago, it is evident that women have actually experienced significant progress. Many women have taken part and played an active role in various lines of life ranging from the economic, educational, social, cultural and other sectors. But, at the same time, there are still many women's problems or issues that have emerged, which actually have consistently revolved around the same topic or theme related to justice and equity between men and women. When we examine these issues on a case-by-case basis, the issues and challenges faced by women are actually quite complex and varied as well as different in nature or forms, particularly in a diverse and vast society like Indonesia.

According to Nina Nurmila, there are five indicators of gender injustice, namely discrimination, subordination, marginalization, stereotypes, and double burden of women.⁴³ Among these five indicators, the last one that will be raised for discussion in this subchapter. Double burden is the workload that one gender experiences more than the other.⁴⁴ This discrepancy arises from to distinguish between role and nature. For example, taking care of the house is a role, not

⁴⁰ Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, *Dawā'ir al-Khayf: Qira'ah fi Khijāb al-Mar'ah* (Maroko: al-Dār al-Bayḍā, 2007), 214.

⁴¹ Riffat Hassan, *Women's Rights and Islam: From the I.C.P.D. to Beijing* (Cairo: International Conference on Population and Development [ICPD], 1994), 79 and 130.

⁴² Asghar Ali Engineer, *Hak-hak Perempuan dalam Islam*, trans. Farid Wadji and Cici Frakha Assegaf (Yogyakarta: LSPAA, 2000), 69-70.

⁴³ Uinjkt.ac.id., "Perempuan Masih Alami Ketidakadilan Gender," June 12, 2019, <https://www.uinjkt.ac.id/perempuan-masih-alami-ketidakadilan-gender/> (accessed October 20, 2023).

⁴⁴ Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak, "Glossary Ketidakadilan Gender," <https://www.kemenpppa.go.id/index.php/page/glossary/23/B> (accessed October 20, 2023).

an inherent nature. Because of the role, therefore, domestic affairs can be done by men or women.

Al-Ghazālī's interpretation is believed to be able to minimize one of the gender injustices in the form of a double burden of women. This is exhibited when al-Ghazālī interpreted al-Nisā [4]: 34, which states that men are *qawwām*. The word *qawwām* here has been defined as a caretaker by her. Al-Ghazālī continues: "in the sense that a man is responsible for making a living for his wife and children. Also, he is responsible for helping his wife to complete the housework. The leader position requires men to act with kindness and fairness in all interactions with women, in everything they do in the context of service."

In addition to her *tafsīr*, al-Ghazālī's thoughts that can minimize the double burden of women can also be found in the book *Mushkilat al-Shabāb wa al-Fatayāt fī Marhalat al-Murāhaqah*. This work addresses two questions related to the double burden of women.⁴⁵ The first question asks whether Islam oppresses women which refer to al-Baqarah [2]: 228, and al-Nisā [4]: 34. Al-Ghazālī replied that Islam does not oppress women. Instead, it is the traditions, customs and deviations that persist in some people's minds, which are wrongly associated with Islam, that lead to the oppression of women. Regarding al-Baqarah [2]: 228, al-Ghazālī explains that *darajah* in this verse signifies the level of care and protection, not the level of coercion, injustice, and tyranny. As for al-Nisā [4]: 34, al-Ghazālī states that leadership is a responsibility and a mandate, not only provisioning and leadership.

In response to the second question, whether marriage impedes *da'wah*, al-Ghazālī replied that marriage demands great responsibility, including for serving the Islamic community, educating the family, and caring for her husband and children. She emphasized that there is actually no contradiction between fulfilling these responsibilities and engaging in *da'wah*.

Indeed, a married woman proselytizer (active in the public sphere) can carry out her mission in the world of *da'wah* as long as she is willing to manage her time, and perform her *da'wah* duties properly according to the societal conditions she encounters. While at home, she receives encouragement and protection from her hus-

⁴⁵ Zaynab al-Ghazālī, *Bertanya kepada Zainab al-Ghazālī*, trans. Baharuddin Fannani (Bandung: al-Bayan, 2000), 46-47 and 155-156.

band and family. Therefore, a woman proselytizer should select a husband who complements her duties as a proselytizer. The ideal decision is to accept a husband who is religiously observant and supportive during challenging times, offering encouragement and enthusiasm. Without such a husband, life would not be unsteady, and the heart would struggle to find peace.

Conclusion

Zaynab al-Ghazālī is an Egyptian *dā'iyah mujahidah*, activist, Muslim feminist, and female *tafsīr* writer whose *tafsīr* is complete from al-Fātiḥah [1] to al-Nās [114]. Her magnum opus is entitled *Nazārat fi Kitāb Allah*. Although her career journey was once in the new bias environment and later shifted to the old bias, the outcome of her interpretation of gender verses demonstrates equity between men and women. She neither places women in a subordinate position nor insists that women must be equal to men. Followed by paradigms formulated by Shihab and Muhammad, al-Ghazālī's interpretation can be described as moderate-progressive, as it aligns with the theoretical foundations and basic assumptions of the group of scholars. The practical implications of al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the terms *qawwām* and *darajah*—wherein she posits that men are responsible for supporting their wives and hold a higher degree in terms of care and protection—serve to mitigate gender inequity, particularly the double burdens of women. This interpretation represents one of al-Ghazālī significant contributions towards achieving gender equity.

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