

Regular Article

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Women's Nature in the Qur'an: Hermeneutical Considerations on Traditional and Modern Exegeses

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Abstract: Some verses of the holy Qur'an speak of a preference of man over woman such as 2:228, 4:34 and 43:18. One can ask whether man and woman have the same essence or whether man has certain characteristics that make him own a different and superior essence. How have exegetes understood these verses through history? Research on more than 100 classical and contemporary Shia and Sunni exegeses demonstrates that understanding of these verses was constant for centuries but was subject to evolution in the twentieth century. In this evolution, the inferiority of women in earlier exegeses was largely replaced by exegeses that provide respect and reverence for women. This change in understanding of the verses has been undoubtedly influenced by improvement in the cultural, social and economic situation of women in the twentieth century. A finding of this research is that some Qur'anic verses have the potentiality for different, and sometimes contradictory, understandings. On the other hand, the cultural and historical frameworks of the exegetes have played a crucial role in their understanding of the Qur'an. Therefore, understanding and interpreting the Qur'an is a dynamic process that should be reviewed according to the needs of the time.

Keywords: woman, inferiority, Qur'an, exegesis, historical approach

1 Introduction

The position of women in the Islamic worldview is an important problem in the contemporary world. Some thinkers criticize Islamic teachings regarding Muslim women's rights and their subordinate position.¹ For some, the solution relies on Muslim women being freed from a "religion that veils and reviles them".² Modern defenders of Islam have to answer whether Islam gives women the same degree and status as men or whether it considers women inferior to men. In order to answer this question, one should refer to Islamic texts and their interpretations.

In the Qur'an, the first and most important Islamic text, there are three groups of verses regarding the status of men and women. The first group is the verses that can be used to defend the equality of men and women. The Qur'an asserts that men and women have equal dignity.³ In the Qur'anic worldview, men's

1 Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights*; El Sa'dāwī, *Hidden Face*; Bodman and Tohidi, *Woman*; Winter, "Theoretical Issues".

2 Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights*, quoted from Brown, "Islam and Feminism", 75.

3 "O mankind, We have created you from a man and a woman, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of Allah is the most god fearing of you" (49:13). All Qur'an translations are my own.

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and women's actions are worth the same in the presence of Allah.⁴ Mental virtues are valuable for both men and women, and Allah appreciates them.⁵ Men and women both own what they earn.⁶

The second group includes the verses that pass different jurisprudential laws for men and women. For instance, men have polygamy rights;⁷ a man's share in inheritance is more than a woman's;⁸ the witness of two women equals that of one man;⁹ and in the case of a woman being disobedient to her husband (*nushūz*), her husband has permission to beat her.¹⁰ These verses have the potential to be interpreted in such a way that men and women have the same human worth and dignity but different rights. These two groups of verses lie outside the scope of the present article, which focuses on the third group.

The third group of verses speaks of the different natures of a man and a woman and draws an inferior picture of a woman's essence; they also state the superiority of men over women. I found three verses in this group, "[...] and men have a degree above them [...]",¹¹ "Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that Allah has preferred in bounty some of them over others, and for that they have expended of their property"¹² and "What! One who is brought up amid ornaments and is inconspicuous in contests?"¹³

One might object to interpreting these three verses as describing the inferiority of a woman's nature to a man's. This research aims to discuss how Muslim exegetes have understood these verses. To this end, detailed, historical and categorized content analyses of the verses' exegeses will be presented. One hundred and seven exegeses from the eighth century to the contemporary time were chosen for the investigation, including 61 Shia and 46 Sunni exegeses. All exegetes are men except Bānū'Amīn Isfahānī, a Shia woman from Isfahan. These results should indicate the degree of difference or similarity that is evident through the centuries.

As the chronological turning point in exegetical ideas was the twentieth century, each report below is divided into two main parts: exegeses prior to the twentieth century and exegeses after the twentieth century. Sixty exegeses were written prior to the twentieth century and 47 were written during and since the twentieth century. The exegetical ideas are categorized into three groups including traditional, traditionalist and progressive, based on the diversity and similarity of their contents. Traditional exegeses include all those prior to the twentieth century. They are very similar in their approach and contents. Traditionalist exegeses were written during and since the twentieth century, and their approach and contents are similar to traditional exegeses. Progressive exegeses are those written during and since the twentieth century and express content, approach or literature that differs from traditional exegeses.

Using such vast resources enables an evaluation of Islamic tradition throughout its history and in two different sects. The results will demonstrate the diversity and similarities of Muslims' ideas about the status of women.

⁴ "And whoever does good deeds whether male or female and (he or she) is a believer these shall enter the garden" (4:124).

⁵ "Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the alms giving men and the alms giving women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward" (33:35).

⁶ "To men belongs a share of what they have earned, and to women a share of what they have earned" (4:32).

⁷ "Marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four" (4:3).

⁸ "The male shall have the equal of the portion of two females" (4:11).

⁹ "And call in to witness from among your men two witnesses but if there are not two men, then one man and two women from among those whom you choose to be witnesses, so that if one of the two errs, the second of the two may remind the other" (2:282).

¹⁰ "As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them" (4:34).

¹¹ 2:228.

¹² 4:34.

¹³ 43:18.

2 The degree of man over woman

Do men and women have the same nature in Islam or is one superior? Qur'an¹⁴ speaks of a degree (*darajah*) that men have over women:

[...]and men have a degree above them[...]

The most important question to be addressed in the exegesis of this verse is “What does the Qur'an mean by ‘a degree of men above women?’” Traditional exegetes all had a similar approach when answering this question. Nevertheless, earlier exegeses only mention the superiority of men over women with respect to legal rights. Over time, the breadth of meaning of “degrees” increased and began to include intellectual and intrinsic abilities and even a superiority of men's faith. The exegetes provide evidence and justification to support each characteristic covered by the degree. The content of the traditional exegeses can be categorized as follows:

- (1) “The degree” is the superiority of men's rights, responsibilities and positions
 - (1.1) Superiority of men's rights in general, such as men's share of inheritance (*sahm al-irṭh*), their blood price (*diyah*) and the superiority of men's testimony (*shahādah*);¹⁵
 - (1.2) Men's superiority in their social responsibilities and positions such as *jihād*, commandment (*imārah*), caliphate (*khilāfah*) and judgment (*qizāwāh*).¹⁶

In the exegeses after the eleventh century, two traditions (*ḥadīths*) are quoted under this verse about the exclusion of women from *jihād*. In the first *ḥadīth*, a woman comes to the Prophet Muhammad and says she is the representative of all women of that area. She asked him the reason women are excluded from the virtues of *jihād* and its rewards. The Prophet answers that being a housewife, providing for a husband's needs and accepting his rights equals the reward of *jihad*.¹⁷ In the second *ḥadīth*, the Prophet says staying modest and avoiding disloyalty to her husband is worth twice as much as *jihad*.¹⁸

- (1.3) The superiority of a husband's rights over his wife, such as in the case of false accusations of adultery (*qazf*), only wives are to be physically punished (*ḥadd*). The divorce and return (*raj'at*) right is exclusive to husbands. A wife must obey her husband. She cannot perform a recommendable fast (*al-ṣawm al-mustaḥabb*) or pilgrimage (*al-hajj al-mustaḥabb*) without her husband's permission. Whenever her husband calls her to bed, she must obey and there is no such duty for the husband. Only the husband has the right of polygamy.¹⁹

One exegete says explicitly that the huge difference between a husband and a wife's rights means that a wife is like a powerless prisoner in her husband's hands.²⁰ He quoted that the

¹⁴ 2:228.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jami' Al-Bayān*, vol. 2, 275–276; Al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr Al-'Ulūm*, vol. 1, 150; Al-Tha'labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 2, 173; Al-Isfarā'īnī, *Tāj Al-Tarājīm*, vol. 1, 249; Al-Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān*, vol. 2, 241; Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, vol. 3, 124–125; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib*, vol. 1, 629; Al-Tha'libī, *Jawāhir*, vol. 1, 458; Al-Kāshānī, *Khulaṣah*, vol. 1, 458; Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr Al-Manthūr*, vol. 1, 277; Al-Shawkānī, *Fath*, vol. 1, 272.

¹⁷ Al-Tha'labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 2, 173; Al-Isfarā'īnī, *Tāj Al-Tarājīm*, vol. 1, 249; Al-Jurjānī, *Jilā' Al-'Azhān*, vol. 1, 290; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 1, 362.

¹⁸ Al-Tha'labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 2, 173; Al-Jurjānī, *Jilā' Al-'Azhān*, vol. 1, 290.

¹⁹ Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām*, vol. 2, 68; Al-Ṭabarī, *Jami' Al-Bayān*, vol. 2, 275–276; Al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr Al-'Ulūm*, vol. 1, 150; Al-Ṭabarī kiyāharāsī, *Aḥkām*, vol. 1, 163; Al-Tha'labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 2, 173; Al-Isfarā'īnī, *Tāj Al-Tarājīm*, vol. 1, 249; Al-Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān*, vol. 2, 241; Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, vol. 3, 124–125; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib*, vol. 1, 629; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 160; Ibn Juzayy, *Al-Tashīl*, vol. 1, 122; Al-Jurjānī, *Jilā' Al-'Azhān*, vol. 1, 290; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 1, 141; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 459; Tha'libī, *Jawāhir*, vol. 1, 458; Al-Maḥallī and Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Jalālayn*, 39; Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib 'illiyah*, 74; Al-Muqaddas Al-Ardibīlī, *Zubdah*, 593; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 1, 362; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 2, 14; Al-Kāshānī, *Khulaṣah*, vol. 1, 136; Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr Al-Manthūr*, vol. 1, 277; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 215; Al-Fayḍ Al-Kāshānī, *Al-'Aṣfā*, vol. 1, 109; Shubbar, *Al-Jawhar*, 73; Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr Al-Madīd*, vol. 1, 257.

²⁰ Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib*, vol. 1, 629.

Prophet Muhammad recommended that men be good with women because they are prisoners ('*āwanī* the plural form of '*ānī*: imprisoned),²¹ and the Prophet also said "fear disobedience of Allāh's commands about two weak groups: orphans and women".²²

Another exegete states that the husband is the owner (*mālik*) of his wife, as she is not allowed to perform a recommendable fast (*al-ṣawm al-mustaḥab*) or to leave the house without his permission. He is the absolute ruler. He can divorce whenever he wishes, irrespective of whether his wife agrees or not; women do not have any of these rights.²³

Another exegete has likened marriage to slavery.²⁴ From the twelfth century until the twentieth century, a *ḥadīth* from the Prophet is quoted in the exegetical works: "If prostration (*sijdah*) was allowed for anyone except Allāh I would order wives to prostrate to their husbands."²⁵ Some exegetes from the sixteenth century until the twentieth century quote a *ḥadīth* that states that a wife's rights are less than 1% of those of her husband.²⁶

- (1.4) A husband's exclusive responsibilities toward his wife; these include the duty of financial support of one's wife (*nafaqah*) and paying the wife's dowry (*ṣidāq, mahr*).²⁷
- (2) The degree of superiority of man over woman reflects a human weakness and a disability in woman;²⁸ the exegetes mean that women are weak in being human. They are incomplete humans. They have disabilities. He does not mention what kind of disability, as if it is obvious. Men do not suffer this weakness or disability, and this is reflected in their degree of superiority.
- (3) The degree is a man's intellect, which is superior to a woman's.²⁹
- (4) The degree is the chronological priority of man's creation. Also, woman was created from man. So man was the original.³⁰
- (5) From the fourteenth century onward, the superiority of men in faith (*īmān*), spiritual virtues such as almsgiving (*infāq*), regard (*ra'āyah*), nobility (*sharaf*) and their superiority in creation (*khalq*) and temperament (*khulq*) are further reasons provided for women's inferiority. Keeping Allāh's boundaries (*hifẓ ḥudūd Allāh*) and obedience to his commands by men was added to this list in the sixteenth century.³¹
- (6) From the fifteenth century onward, men's capacity for perfection (*kamāl*), prophecy and Imamate were added to the list of items that represent a man's degree of superiority over a woman's.³²

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Haqqī Al-Burūsawī, *Rūḥ Al-Bayān*, vol. 1, 354–355.

24 Al-'Ālūsī, *Rūḥ Al-Ma'anī*, vol. 1, 530.

25 Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, vol. 3, 125; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib*, vol. 1, 629; Al-Muqaddas Al-Ardibīlī n.d., 593; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 1, 362; Al-'Āmilī, *Al-Wajīz*, vol. 1, 188; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 215; Al-Maḥḥarī, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 300.

26 Al-Muqaddas Al-Ardibīlī, *Zubdah*, 593; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 1, 362; Al-Baḥrānī, *Al-Burhān*, vol. 1, 475; Al-'Āmilī, *Al-Wajīz*, vol. 1, 188; Al-'Arūsī Al-Ḥuwayzī, *Nur Al-Thaqalayn*, vol. 1, 222; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 215; Fayḍ Al-Kāshānī, *Al-Ṣāfi*, vol. 1, 258; Haqqī Al-Burūsawī n.d., vol. 1, 354–355; Shubbar, *Al-Jawhar*, vol. 1, 230.

27 Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām*, vol. 2, 68; Al-Ṭabarī, *Jami' Al-Bayān*, vol. 2, 275–276; Al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr Al-'Ulūm*, vol. 1, 150; Al-Ṭabarī kīyāharāsī, *Aḥkām*, vol. 1, 163; Al-Tha'labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 2, 173; Al-Isfarā'inī, *Tāj Al-Tarājīm*, vol. 1, 249; Al-Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān*, vol. 2, 241; Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, vol. 3, 124–125; Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib*, vol. 1, 629; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 160; Ibn Juzayy, *Al-Tashīl*, vol. 1, 122; Al-Jurjānī, *Jilā' Al-'Azhān*, vol. 1, 290; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 1, 141; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 459; Tha'ālibī, *Jawāhir*, vol. 1, 458; Al-Maḥallī and Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Jalālayn*, 39; Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawāri, *Mawāhib*, 74; Al-Muqaddas Al-Ardibīlī, *Zubdah*, 593; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 1, 362; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 2, 14; Al-Kāshānī, *Khulaṣah*, vol. 1, 136; Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr Al-Manthūr*, vol. 1, 277; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 215; Al-Fayḍ Al-Kāshānī, *Al'Asfā*, vol. 1, 109; Shubbar, *Al-Jawhar*, 73; Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr Al-Madīd*, vol. 1, 257.

28 Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'yif*, vol. 1, 181; Al-Shawkānī, *Fath*, vol. 1, 272.

29 Sūr Abādī, vol. 1, 192; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib*, vol. 1, 629; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 160; Al-Kāshānī, *Khulaṣah*, vol. 1, 136; Haqqī Al-Burūsawī, vol. 1, 354–355; Al-Shawkānī, *Fath*, vol. 1, 272; Al-Nakhjawānī, *Al-Fawātiḥ*, vol. 1, 78.

30 Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, vol. 3, 124–125; Al-Nakhjawānī, *Al-Fawātiḥ*, vol. 1, 78; Al-Shawkānī, *Fath*, vol. 1, 272.

31 Ibn Juzayy, vol. 1, 122; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 1, 141; Ibn Kathīr, vol. 1, 451; Al-Muqaddas Al-Ardibīlī, *Zubdah*, 593; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 1, 362; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 2, 14; Al-Kāshānī, *Khulaṣah*, vol. 1, 136; Al-Nakhjawānī, *Al-Fawātiḥ*, vol. 1, 78; Al-'Āmilī, *Al-Wajīz*, vol. 1, 188; Al-Kāshānī, *Al-Mu'in*, vol. 1, 113; Al-Huwaydī Al-Baghdādī, *Al-Mu'in*, 35; Haqqī Al-Burūsawī n.d., vol. 1, 354–355; Al-'Ālūsī, *Rūḥ Al-Ma'anī*, vol. 1, 530; Shubbar, *Al-Jawhar*, vol. 1, 220.

32 Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawāri 1369, 74; Al-Kāshānī M.F. 1336, vol. 2, 14.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, traditionalist exegeses preserve patriarchal tendencies and speak of the degree of men's superiority and its justification as follows:

- (1) Superiority of men's rights over women's.³³
- (2) Superiority of a husband's rights over those of his wife.³⁴ The *ḥadīth* that a wife's rights are 100 times less than her husband's,³⁵ and the prostration of a wife to her husband³⁶ are still commonly used. The superiority of a man's right of sexual satisfaction described in some texts is the exclusive right of men.³⁷ Some quote from a number of jurists (*fuqahā'*) that say a woman's right to enjoy sex is not equal to that of a man, and she does not have any right related to the issue.³⁸
- (3) Superiority of men over women because of men's superior intellect.³⁹

Progressive exegetical ideas, from the twentieth century onward, attempt to defend Islamic teachings and orders concerning women and explain that man and woman are the same in their human essence, that is, they have equal rights. In cases where women do not have similar rights, it is considered justice, rather than discrimination.⁴⁰ For them, the reason for preference of a man or woman over the other is one of common law (*'urf*), instinct (*fiṭrah*), nature (*ṭabi'ah*) and competence. These ideas can be classified as follows:

- (1) Men's and women's rights are not equal. They provide different explanations of this belief, including:
 - (1.1) Women's rights are in proportion to her duties, exactly like men's rights and duties. Some mention that a man's rights and duties in total are greater than those of a woman; equality of rights is not a criterion for justice. Every person or class gets rights over others based on their abilities and the role they fulfill.⁴¹
 - (1.2) Man's degree of superiority over a woman is reflective of their natural differences. The superiority stands only when man's leadership shows its fruits in marital life. Otherwise, he naturally loses his leadership rights and someone capable from the family will replace him, possibly his wife or child.⁴²
 - (1.3) Common laws (*'urf*) are the criteria defining a man's and a woman's rights in marriage. What *'urf* considers a right, is a right in the presence of Allah.⁴³ "*'urf*" comes from the Qur'anic term "*ma'rūf*" which is the term for the current customs of that place and time. Therefore, rights change with the change of place, time, situations and persons. Sustenance rights (*nafaqah*),

33 Sabzawārī Al-Najafī *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 1, 281, *Al-Irshād*, 41; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 261; Al-Mughniyyah, *Al-Mubīn*, 46; Al-Mughniyyah, *Al-Kāshif*, vol. 1, 344–345; Mīrzā Khusravānī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 298; Al-Āmilī, *Tafsīr*, I, vol. 1, 438; Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr*, 111; Al-Ḥā'irī Al-Tehrānī, *Muqtanayāt*, vol. 2, 71.

34 Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Irshād*, 41; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 1, 281; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 261; Al-Darwaza, *Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 2, 416; Al-Mughniyyah, *Al-Kāshif*, vol. 1, 344–345, n.d., 46; Al-Janābīzī, *Bayan Al-Sa'ādah*, vol. 1, 202; Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr*, 111; Al-Ḥā'irī Al-Tehrānī, *Muqtanayāt*, vol. 2, 71; Nawawī Al-Jāwī, *Murāḥ*, vol. 1, 79; Faḍlullāh, *min Waḥy*, vol. 1, 283.

35 Al-Husainī Al-Shāh 'Abdul'aḍīmī, *Ithnā'asharī*, vol. 1, 408; Al-Janābīzī, *Bayan Al-Sa'ādah*, vol. 1, 202; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 1, 280; Al-Ḥā'irī Al-Tehrānī, *Muqtanayāt*, vol. 2, 71.

36 Al-Husainī Al-Shāh 'Abdul'aḍīmī, *Ithnā'asharī*, vol. 1, 408; Mīrzā Khusravānī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 298; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 1, 280; Al-Ḥā'irī Al-Tehrānī, *Muqtanayāt*, vol. 2, 71; Sayyid Quṭb, *fī Ḍilāl*, vol. 1, 247.

37 Bānū'Amīn, *Makhzan*, vol. 2, 322.

38 Faḍlullāh, *min Waḥy*, vol. 4, 283.

39 Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 1, 280; Mulla Ḥuwaysh, vol. 5, 189; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 261; Al-Janābīzī, *Bayan Al-Sa'ādah*, vol. 1, 202; Al-Āmilī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 438; Ja'farī, *Kawthar*, vol. 1, 535.

40 These two statements seem to be in conflict but this is what some exegetes stated, as discussed shortly.

41 Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Irshād*, 41; Al-Hussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 203; Al-Ṭāliqānī, *Partovī*, vol. 2, 145; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 261; Al-Hussainī Al-Shirāzī, *Taqrīb*, vol. 1, 252; Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr*, 111; Faḍlullāh, *min Waḥy*, vol. 4, 283; Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Nimūneh*, vol. 2, 158; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*, vol. 1, 535; Al-Mudarrisī, *Hudā Al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, 398; Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mizān*, vol. 2, 232.

42 Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 261.

43 Riḍā, *Al-Manār*, from Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 261.

settlement (*sukunah*) and sexual relations (*waṭʾ*) all refer to *ma'rūf*. The aim is good behavior and a good temperament.⁴⁴

- (1.4) The family as a social unit needs a master. Man is capable of being the master, as he knows what is wise and the difference between right and wrong, and by his power and property he can actualize his decisions.⁴⁵ One exegete mentions that women always have understood and will understand men's capability within themselves, even when they gain money, knowledge and power.⁴⁶
- (1.5) Because of man's guardianship of his family, he should support the woman and pay for her expenses; the woman should obey him in exchange.⁴⁷
- (1.6) Some exegetes compare women's rights before Islam with her rights after Islam.⁴⁸ Some compare Muslim women's rights with western women's rights before the Renaissance, when they were treated like animals.⁴⁹ Some explain that the western critique of Muslim women's rights is due to some ignorant Muslims who are failing to observe Islamic commands and thereby acting inappropriately.⁵⁰ They state that Islam has given Muslim women a degree of freedom that western women have not yet reached.⁵¹ One exegete claims that if women had divorce rights, the family foundation and all human systems would collapse, as it has in Europe and America, and man would have no moment of peace unless he dies or commits suicide!⁵²
- (2) Some exegetes speak of equal rights of spouses. These rights are reported as different but equal.⁵³ A wife has the right to choose her husband, like her husband has this right, and after divorce she can reject her husband's return (*raj'ah*).⁵⁴ One exegete has commented on a *ḥadīth* quoted many times in past exegeses, which considers the husband's rights 100 times more valuable than his wife's rights. This exegete says "I swear to Allah this *ḥadīth* is an accusation to Prophet Muhammad and contradicts with the absolutely clear text of verse⁵⁵ '*wa lahunna mithlul laẓi 'alayhinna bil ma'rūf*'".⁵⁶ Furthermore, exegetes used to consider no right for sexual satisfaction for women, but now a *ḥadīth* from the Prophet Muhammad is quoted which commands men to behave in their intercourse, so that they satisfy their wives as well.⁵⁷
- (3) In the two most recent centuries, exegetes have spoken of equality and sameness of man and woman in human nature. According to them, man and woman are created from the same origin and root; both have intellect, volition, choice and control.⁵⁸ They are exactly the same in humanity,⁵⁹ essence, feelings, awareness and wisdom; both are completely human, have a mind to think about good and evil and have a heart to appreciate what they like;⁶⁰ in other words, both man and woman have a

44 Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr*, 111; Al-Mūsawī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 4, 10; Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mizān*, vol. 2, 232.

45 Riḍā from Al-Darwaza, *Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 6, 416; Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 167; Makārim Al-Shīrāzī, *Nimūneh*, vol. 2, 158; Mudarrīsī, vol. 1, 398; Al-Ṭāliqānī, *Partovī*, vol. 2, 145.

46 Al-Darwaza, *Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 6, 416.

47 Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 167; Faḍlullah, vol. 4, 283.

48 Al-Ḥussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 231.

49 Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 167; Al-Mughniyyah, *Al-Kāshif*, vol. 1, 344.

50 Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 167; Al-'Āmilī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 441.

51 Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 167.

52 Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 1, 280.

53 Al-Ḥussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 231; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 260; Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 167; Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr*, 111; Bānū'Amin, *Makhzan*, vol. 2, 322; Al-Mūsawī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 4, 11; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*, vol. 4, 40; Riḍā from Al-Darwaza, *Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 6, 416.

54 Al-Darwaza, *Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 6, 416; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 261; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*, vol. 4, 40.

55 Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*, vol. 4, 42.

56 2:228.

57 Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*, vol. 4, 42.

58 Al-Ḥussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 230.

59 Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 260; Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 167; Makārim Al-Shīrāzī, *Nimūneh*, vol. 2, 158.

60 Riḍā from Al-Darwaza, *Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 6, 416.

heart with feelings. Every one prefers what is suitable and enjoyable for him/her. Both man and woman choose according to their wisdom and feelings.

- (4) In some exegeses, it is mentioned or explicitly stated that, in Islam, man and woman are equal, while man is still superior.⁶¹

According to traditional exegetes, man has more rights and responsibilities. In their eyes, a linear cosmology governs the relationships of man and woman with Allah. Man is Allah's slave, indirectly, and woman is called powerless, imprisoned and enslaved, so she is Allah's slave via the mediation of man.⁶² Woman has a shortcoming in her level of humanity, intellect and faith. Her weak body and the effect of menstruation which distances her from acts of worship are described as matters of shame and humiliation. Finally, woman is unable to reach human perfection, prophecy, caliphate or imamate.

The change in exegetes' ideas on the degree is synchronized with the change of woman's situation in the world. Although traditionalist exegeses repeat some ideas of the traditional exegeses, the domain of the inferiority theory in their works is limited and slavery literature is not used here. Some progressive exegetes speak of equality of man and woman. Some speak of the differences in roles but the same human worth. The differences seem less egalitarian than equal here. But emphasizing the differences means man and woman do not have a linear relationship to Allah. Man is not the mediator between woman and Allah. They are both equal in being his worshipers. Some paradoxical expressions in some exegeses demonstrate the contradiction between Islamic traditional cosmology and contemporary needs of the believers.

3 Preference of some over others

The second verse that helps in understanding the nature of women in Islamic tradition speaks of preference (*faḍl*):

Men are the managers of the affairs (*qawwāmūn*) of women for that Allah has preferred in bounty (*faḍḍala*) some of them over others, and for that they have expended of their property.⁶³

There are some questions which exegetes have answered about this verse, such as the occasion of revelation and the meaning of the word "*qawwāmūn*". We focus only on these relevant problems: the referent of "some of them" and "others" in verse (*ba'uhum 'alā ba'd*), the reason of preference or superiority and "the wisdom of preference".

Traditional exegetes usually interpreted the referent of *ba'uhum 'alā ba'd* as the preference of men over women.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, in the fourteenth century, it was suggested that this part of the verse is ambiguous, so a general preference cannot be deduced from it. Implicitly, there could be a woman who is superior to a man.⁶⁵ In the fifteenth century, another exegete stated that this preference is for the group of men over the group of women; he also mentioned that there could be a woman who is superior to a man.⁶⁶

Although most of the exegeses after the twentieth century have a traditionalist opinion on the referent of these words, that is superiority of "man" over "woman",⁶⁷ there are some limited progressive answers to this question. They have asserted that the preference in this verse is:

- (1) Preference of some men over some women.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Al-Sa'di, *Taysir*, 111; Al-Mūsawī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 4, 11; Bānū'Amin, *Makhzan*, vol. 2, 322.

⁶² Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence*, 12.

⁶³ 4:34.

⁶⁴ See for instance: Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, 505; Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 1, 177; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 3, 19; Al-Nakhjawānī, *Al-Fawātiḥ*, vol. 1, 151.

⁶⁵ Al-'Andulusī, *Al-Baḥr*, vol. 3, 623.

⁶⁶ Al-Fāḍil Al-Miqdād, *Kanz Al-'Irfān*, vol. 2, 212.

- (2) Preference of most men over most women.⁶⁹
- (3) Men are preferred in some aspects and women in some other aspects.⁷⁰ For instance, men are preferred in their thinking and intellect and women are preferred in their feelings and affections;⁷¹ men are preferred in physical power and tolerance in difficulties and women are capable of exquisite and precise works;⁷² and men are superior in intellect and power and women are stronger in keeping what is in their trust.⁷³

The second question is “what is/are the reason(s) of preference ‘*faql*’ of man over woman?” The answers of the traditional exegeses can be classified as follows:

- (1) Men’s complete intellect, prudence (*ḥazm*), good management (*tadbīr*); some added men’s firm will (*‘azm*) and knowledge. Others added men’s patience and intuitive vision (*ḥads*).⁷⁴
- (2) Men’s physical power; some mentioned activities such as horse riding and archery which were exclusive to men.⁷⁵
- (3) Men’s superiority in their rights, such as polygamy, divorce rights, increased share of inheritance, blood price and the value of their witness.⁷⁶
- (4) Men’s superiority in religious actions such as their power in worshiping Allah, *jihād*, *jum’ah* and *jamā’ah* prayers, promotion of good and prevention of evil (*al-‘amr bi’l-ma’rūf wa al-nahy ‘anil-munkar*), call to prayer (*‘adhān*) and seclusion in a mosque (*‘itikāf*).⁷⁷
- (5) Men’s superiority in religion and certainty (*yaqīn*) and strength of faith.⁷⁸ An exegete quotes a *ḥadīth* from the Prophet Muhammad: “I have not seen anything that can dispossess the wisdom of careful man more than the incomplete intellect and religion (i.e. women)”. Women asked, “how is this?” He

⁶⁷ All exegeses under survey except Al-‘Andulusī, *Al-Baḥr*; Al-Fāḍil Al-Miqdād, *Kanz Al-‘Irfān*; Hijāzī, *Al-Wāḍiḥ*; Bānū’Amin, *Makḥzan*; Makārim Al-Shīrāzī, *Al-Amthal*; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-Balāgh*; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*; Muṣṭafawī, *Roshan*.

⁶⁸ Hijāzī, *Al-Wāḍiḥ*, vol. 1, 370.

⁶⁹ Bānū’Amin, *Makḥzan*, vol. 4, 63; Makārim Al-Shīrāzī, *Al-Amthal*, vol. 3, 218.

⁷⁰ Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-Balāgh*, vol. 1, 84, 1365, vol. 7, 38; Muṣṭafawī, *Roshan*, vol. 5, 361.

⁷¹ Qarashī, *Aḥsan Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 2, 354.

⁷² Muṣṭafawī, *Roshan*, vol. 5, 361.

⁷³ Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*, vol. 7, 38.

⁷⁴ Al-Naḥḥās, *T’rāb*, vol. 1, 212; Al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr Al-‘Ulūm*, vol. 1, 300; Al-Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān*, vol. 3, 189; Sūr’Ābādī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 412; Al-Tha’labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 3, 302; Ibn Al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām*, vol. 1 p 416; Al-Ṭabarsī, *Jawāmi’*, vol. 1, 412; Al-Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān*, vol. 5, 348; Ibn Al-Jawzī, *Zād Al-masīr*, vol. 1, 401; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, 254; Al-Maybudī, *Kashf Al-‘Asrār*, vol. 2, 492; Al-Ṭabarsī, *Jawāmi’*, vol. 3, 69; Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah Al-Andulusī, *Al-muharrar*, vol. 2, 48; Al-Baghawī, *Ma’ālim*, vol. 1, 611; Al-Rāzī F. 1420, vol. 10, 71; Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi’*, vol. 5, 169; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 72; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā’ib*, vol. 2, 409; Al-Jurjānī, *Jilā’ Al-‘Azhān*, vol. 2, 210; Ibn Juzayy, *Al-Tashīl*, vol. 1, 191; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 371; Al-Fāḍil Al-Miqdād, *Kanz Al-‘Irfān*, vol. 2, 211; Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 1, 177; Al-Maḥallī and Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Jalālayn*, vol. 1, 87; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 3, 19; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 2, 58; Al-Muqaddas Al-‘Ardibīlī, *Zubdah*, vol. 1, 536; Al-Fayḍ Al-Dakanī, *Sawāṭī’*, vol. 2, 30; Al-Nakhjawānī, *Al-Fawātiḥ*, vol. 1, 151; Al-Fayḍ Al-Kāshānī, *Al-‘Aṣfā*, vol. 1, 207; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 469; Al-‘Āmilī, *Al-Wajīz*, vol. 1, 311.

⁷⁵ Sūr’Ābādī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 412; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, 505; Al-Rāzī F. 1420, vol. 10, 71; Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi’*, vol. 5, 169; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 73; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā’ib*, vol. 2, 409; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 469.

⁷⁶ Al-Tha’labī Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 3, 302; Al-Ṭabarsī, *Jawāmi’*, vol. 1, 253; Al-Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān*, vol. 5, 348; Ibn Al-Jawzī, *Zād Al-masīr*, vol. 1, 401; Al-Maybudī 1371, vol. 2, 492; Al-Baghawī, *Ma’ālim*, vol. 1, 611; Al-Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ*, vol. 10, 71; Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi’*, vol. 5, 169; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 72; Al-Jurjānī, *Jilā’ Al-‘Azhān*, vol. 2, 210; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 371; Al-Fāḍil Al-Miqdād, *Kanz Al-‘Irfān*, vol. 2, 211; Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 1, 177.

⁷⁷ Al-Tha’labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 3, 302; Ibn Al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām*, vol. 1, 416; Al-Ṭabarsī, *Jawāmi’*, vol. 1, 253; Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā’iyif*, vol. 1, 330; Al-Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān*, vol. 5, 349; Ibn Al-Jawzī, *Zād Al-masīr*, vol. 1, 401; Al-Maybudī, *Kashf Al-‘Asrār*, vol. 2, 492; Al-Baghawī, *Ma’ālim*, vol. 1, 611; Al-Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ*, vol. 10, 71; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, 55; Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah Al-Andulusī, *Al-muharrar*, vol. 2, 48; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 72; Al-Jurjānī, *Jilā’ Al-‘Azhān*, vol. 2, 210; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 371; Al-Fāḍil Al-Miqdād, *Kanz Al-‘Irfān*, vol. 2, 211; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā’ib*, vol. 2, 409; Ibn Juzayy, *Al-Tashīl*, vol. 1, 191; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 3, 19; Al-Fayḍ Al-Kāshānī, *Al-‘Aṣfā*, vol. 1, 207.

⁷⁸ Al-Tha’labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 3, 302; Ibn Al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām*, vol. 1, 416; Al-Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān*, vol. 5, 348; Maybudī, *Kashf Al-‘Asrār*, vol. 2, 492; Al-Baghawī, *Ma’ālim*, vol. 1, 210; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 371.

replied, “Do not you sometimes quit prayer and fasting (referring to menstruation)? That is because of shortcoming in your religion. And the witness of one of you is half that of a man. That is because of a shortcoming in your intellect.”⁷⁹ From the eleventh century, a *ḥadīth* is quoted: a Jew asked the Prophet Muhammad: “What is the superiority of men over women?” He replied:

Like superiority of the sky over the earth and superiority of water over the land. Water revives the land and man revives woman. If there were no man, women would not be created. Don’t you see how they have menstruation and are unable to worship during the time and men never have this?⁸⁰

(6) Men are superior because prophecy, caliphate, Imamate, etc. are exclusive to them.⁸¹

Traditionalist exegetes vary in their reasons for the preference of men over women. The reasons they suggest include the following:

- (1) Men are superior over women in every aspect.⁸²
- (2) Men’s creation is complete. They are complete in their comprehensions, affections and physical organs.⁸³
- (3) Men are superior in intellect, knowledge and good management.⁸⁴ Some exegetes add that men’s brains and hearts are bigger in size and weight than women’s. They consider this verse a Qur’anic miracle, which pronounced the superiority of men even before the recent understanding of anatomy.⁸⁵
- (4) Men are superior in their courage and physical power.⁸⁶ Some state men are stronger in tolerance of difficulties and responsibilities.⁸⁷ They are stronger at defending their family.⁸⁸
- (5) Men have preference with respect to rights, including the blood price, the share of inheritance, the value of their witness and so on. The social and political aspects of religion such as caliphate, *wilāyah*, *jihad*, *jum’ah*, *jamā’ah* and consultation (*shūra*) are exclusive to men.⁸⁹

⁷⁹ Ibn Al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām*, vol. 1, 416.

⁸⁰ Al-Baḥrānī, *Al-Burhān*, vol. 2, 73; Al-Fayḍ Al-Kāshānī, *Al-Ṣāfi*, vol. 1, 448; Al-Qummī Al-Mashhadī, *Kanz*, vol. 3, 396; Al-‘Arūsī Al-Ḥuwayzī, *Nur Al-Thaqalayn*, vol. 1, 477; Shubbar, *Al-Jawhar*, vol. 2, 42.

⁸¹ Al-Tha’labī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 3, 302; Al-Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān*, vol. 5, 349; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, 505; Al-Baghawī, *Ma’ālim*, vol. 1, 611; Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 10, 72; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 2, 72; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 1, 371; Al-Fāḍil Al-Miqdād, *Kanz Al-‘Irfān*, vol. 2, 211; Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā’ib*, vol. 2, 409; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 256; Ibn Juzayy, *Al-Tashīl*, vol. 1, 191; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 469; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 3, 19; Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 1, 177.

⁸² Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāh, *Ṣafī*, vol. 1, 144.

⁸³ Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, 27; Hijāzī, *Al-Wāḍiḥ*, vol. 1, 370; Al-Karamī Al-Ḥuwayzī, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 223.

⁸⁴ Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 2, 285, 1419, vol. 1, 89; Al-Ḥussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 4, 51; Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 5, 551; Najafī Khumeynī, *Āsān*, vol. 3, 219; Al-Husainī Al-Shāh ‘Abdul‘aḍīmī, *Ithnā‘asharī*, vol. 2, 420; Al-Janābīzī, *Bayan Al-Sa‘ādah*, vol. 2, 15; Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāh, *Ṣafī*, vol. 1, 144; Al-‘Āmili, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 393; Al-Ḥussainī Al-Shirāzī, *Taqrīb*, vol. 1, 475; Al-Sa’dī, *Taysīr*, vol. 1, 186; Al-Qāsimī, *Maḥasin*, vol. 3, 96; Nawawī Al-Jāwī, *Murāḥ*, vol. 1, 195; Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān*, vol. 4, 343; Al-Dakhīl, *Al-Wajīz*, vol. 1, 111; Al-Huwaydī Al-Baghdādī, *Al-Mu‘īn*, 84; Sayyid Karīmī Al-Ḥussainī, *‘Illiyīn*, vol. 1, 84; Al-Ṭayyib, *‘Atyab*, vol. 4, 72; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-Balāgh*, vol. 1, 84; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-Balāgh*, *Al-furqān*, vol. 7, 37; Al-Ḥussainī Al-Shirāzī, *Tabyīn*, vol. 1, 95; Al-Zaḥīlī, *Al-Munīr*, vol. 5, 54; Sayyid Al-Ṭantāwī, *Al-Wasīf*, vol. 3, 136; Burūjirdī, *Jāmi’*, vol. 2, 66; Thaqafī Tehrānī, *Ravān-e Javīd*, vol. 2, 53; Ja’farī, Kawthar, vol. 2, 431; Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Al-Amthal*, vol. 3, 217.

⁸⁵ Al-Balāghī Al-Najafī, *‘Alā’ Al-Raḥmān*, vol. 2, 105; Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 5, 551; Najafī Khumeynī, *Āsān*, vol. 3, 218.

⁸⁶ Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 2, 285, 1419, vol. 1, 89; Al-Ḥussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 4, 51; Najafī Khumeynī, *Āsān*, vol. 3, 219; Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, 27; Al-Janābīzī, *Bayan Al-Sa‘ādah*, vol. 2, 15; Al-Qāsimī, *Maḥasin*, vol. 3, 96; Bānū‘Amīn, *Makhzan*, vol. 4, 63; Nawawī Al-Jāwī, *Murāḥ*, vol. 1, 195; Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān*, vol. 4, 433; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-Balāgh*, vol. 1, 84; Al-Ḥussainī Al-Shirāzī, *Tabyīn*, vol. 1, 95; Al-Zaḥīlī, *Al-Munīr*, vol. 5, 54; Sayyid Al-Ṭantāwī, *Al-Wasīf*, vol. 3, 136; Thaqafī Tehrānī, *Ravān-e Javīd*, vol. 2, 53; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī 1365, vol. 7, 37; Ja’farī, Kawthar, vol. 2, 431.

⁸⁷ Al-Mughniyyah, *Al-Mubīn*, vol. 1, 106.

⁸⁸ Makārim Al-Shirāzī *Al-Amthal*, vol. 3, 217; Sayyid Al-Ṭantāwī, *Al-Wasīf*, vol. 3, 137.

⁸⁹ Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 5, 551; Najafī Khumeynī, *Āsān*, vol. 3, 219; Al-Husainī Al-Shāh ‘Abdul‘aḍīmī, *Ithnā‘asharī*, vol. 2, 421; Al-‘Āmili, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 393; Al-Sa’dī, *Taysīr*, vol. 1, 186; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 2, 285; Al-Qāsimī, *Maḥasin*, vol. 3, 97; Nawawī Al-Jāwī, *Murāḥ*, vol. 1, 195; Al-Zaḥīlī, *Al-Munīr*, vol. 5, 54; Sayyid Al-Ṭantāwī, *Al-Wasīf*, vol. 3, 136.

- (6) Men have preference in faith and religion too because of women's menstruation,⁹⁰ during which women are not permitted to pray or fast. Some quote a *ḥadīth*: "Women are incomplete in intellect, the portion they are given and in their faith".⁹¹

The *ḥadīth* that states the superiority of men over women, because of limitations induced by menstruation, is used and interpreted similarly by post-fourteenth century exegetes.⁹²

Progressive exegetes' ideas are as follows:

- (1) The superiority of men is because of the emotional life of women.⁹³ They don't mention women are in shortage of intellect. They state the emotions of women dominate their intellect.
- (2) Men have preference in their duties. Thus, this superiority is not in their human existence and is not in the hereafter.⁹⁴ They work more; therefore, their tolerance to responsibilities is superior.⁹⁵
- (3) Some exegetes do not speak of superiority or inferiority. They consider that the economic responsibilities of men in the family are the justification for men being the managers of women's affairs (*qawwāmūn* "*alā al-nisā*").⁹⁶

A question raised by progressive exegetes is "Why there should be superiority of one spouse over another? or "What is the wisdom of preference (*faḍl*) of man over woman in creation?" The answers they provide can be summarized as follows:

- (1) If man and woman were to have the same abilities, there would have been no need for the human species to have two classes or genders. The difference in their rights is because of the difference in their formation (*takwīn*).⁹⁷
- (2) Sometimes an inferiority is a blessing for the inferior.⁹⁸
- (3) Family is the most important social unit, and it needs a leader.⁹⁹
- (4) Both wife and husband have important roles and responsibilities in a family. The wife has the great and crucial duty of motherhood which needs physical, mental and intellectual predispositions. Therefore, it is fair that the second member of the family, the husband, is responsible for taking care of the family, which enables the wife to do her duties in reproduction.¹⁰⁰

This verse has the potential to be interpreted in various ways. But traditional exegetes have understood it only within their patriarchal worldview. They draw an inferior image of a woman's mind and body which is their proof for the linear cosmology. Traditionalist exegetes post-twentieth century continue speaking of preferences of man. Progressives do not interpret the preference that is expressed in Qur'an as the general preference of all men over all women. They confirm that some men are preferred over some women. In their ideas, movements from patriarchy to egalitarianism are observable.

Inconspicuous in debates:

The third verse speaks of a quality of inconspicuousness (*ghayr mubīn*):

⁹⁰ 'Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 5, 551.

⁹¹ Al-Ṭayyib, *Āṭyab*, vol. 4, 72, This *ḥadīth* sometimes continues "Their intellect isn't complete because the witness of two women equals the witness of a man. They are incomplete in their portion because their share of inheritance is half of the share of a man. And their faith is incomplete because they do not pray and fast during their menstruation."

⁹² Al-Husainī Al-Shāh 'Abdul'aqīmī, *Ithnā'asharī*, vol. 2, 420; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 2, 286; Thaqafi Tehrānī, *Ravān-e Javid*, vol. 2, 53; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*, vol. 7, 37.

⁹³ Bānū'Amīn, *Makhzan*, vol. 4, 63.

⁹⁴ Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Al'Amthal*, vol. 3, 218.

⁹⁵ Al-Mudarrisi, *Hudā Al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2, 74.

⁹⁶ Al-Darwaza, *Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 8, 105–106; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 3, 781–782; Sayyid Quṭb, *fi Ḍilāl*, vol. 2, 648–652.

⁹⁷ Al-Mughniyyah, *Al-Kāshif*, vol. 2, 314.

⁹⁸ Al-Balāghī Al-Najafī, *'Alā' Al-Rahmān*, vol. 2, 105; Al-Mūsawī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, vol. 8, 158.

⁹⁹ Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Al'Amthal*, vol. 3, 216; Ja'farī 1376–1381, vol. 2, 431.

¹⁰⁰ Sayyid Quṭb, *fi Ḍilāl*, vol. 2, 650–651.

What! One who is brought up amid ornaments and is inconspicuous in debates?¹⁰¹

Verses 43:15–19 are about polytheists' beliefs. They consider angels to be Allah's daughters. Castigating them, Allah asks whether they ascribe to Allah the one who (girl) they are ashamed of? The one who has grown up wearing ornaments and cannot speak clearly in conflicts? It is noteworthy that a few exegeses suggest that the verse could refer to idols¹⁰² or Moses the Prophet,¹⁰³ but most of the exegetes emphasize that the verse is more likely to be about girls and women.¹⁰⁴ A crucial question in almost all the relevant exegeses is "Why are women unable to speak and defend themselves in debates?"

Traditional exegetes before the twentieth century gave two possible reasons:

1. Women's stupidity (*sifāhah*) and shortage of intellect.¹⁰⁵ Some added that the reason for the quality of being inconspicuous in disputes is that women are given little intellect, a lesser portion (of inheritance) and less faith than men.¹⁰⁶
2. Women's essential shortcomings (*al-naqṣ al-ẓāṭi*).

Some wrote that if women were not essentially incomplete, they would not need to decorate themselves with ornaments. Gold and other ornaments are forbidden for men as they are the signs of shortcomings and weakness. A man must avoid being humiliated.¹⁰⁷

Traditionalist exegetes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have also provided two explanations for women being inconspicuous in disputes:

1. Women's stupidity and shortage of intellect.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ 43:18.

¹⁰² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' Al-Bayān*, vol. 25, 35; Ibn 'Aṭīyyah Al-Andalusī, *Al-muharrar*, vol. 5, 49; Al-Maybudī, *Kashf Al-'Asrār*, vol. 9, 55; Ibn Al-Jawzī, *Zād Al-masīr*, vol. 4, 74; Al-Shaybānī, *Nahj Al-Bayān*, vol. 4, 382; Al-'Andalusī, *Al-Baḥr*, vol. 9, 363; Tha'ālībī, *Jawāhir*, vol. 5, 176–177; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 8, 241; Al-Shawkānī, *Faṭḥ*, vol. 4, 630; 'Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 4, 65; Al-'Āmilī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 7, 477; Al-Ṭayyib, *Āṭyab*, vol. 12, 13.

¹⁰³ Al-Qummī, *Tafsīr-e Qummi*, vol. 2, 283–284; Al-Baḥrānī, *Al-Burhān*, vol. 4, 851; Al-'Arūsī Al-Ḥuwayzī, *Nur Al-Thaqalayn*, vol. 4, 595; Al-'Ālūsī, *Rūh Al-Ma'ānī*, vol. 13, 71; Al-Ṭayyib, *Āṭyab*, vol. 12, 13.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Balkhī, *Muqāṭil*, vol. 3, 791; Al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī*, vol. 3, 29; Al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr Al-'Ulūm*, vol. 3, 254; Al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' Al-Bayān*, vol. 25, 35; Tha'ālībī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 8, 331; Al-Rāzī, *Mafāṭīḥ*, vol. 27, 624; Al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim*, vol. 4, 156; Ibn 'Aṭīyyah Al-Andalusī, *Al-muharrar*, vol. 5, 49; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4, 243; Ibn Al-Jawzī, *Zād Al-masīr*, vol. 4, 74; Al-Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān*, vol. 17, 157; Al-Ṭabarsī, *Jawāmi'*, vol. 4, 63; Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, vol. 16, 72; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 4, 104; Ibn Juzayy, *Al-Tashīl*, vol. 2, 255; Al-'Andalusī, *Al-Baḥr*, vol. 9, 363; Tha'ālībī, *Jawāhir*, vol. 5, 176–177; Al-Kāshifī Al-Sabzawārī, *Mawāhib*, 1099; Al-Fayḍ Al-Dakānī, *Sawāṭi'*, vol. 5, 132; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 8, 241; Al-Kāshānī, *Khulaṣah*, vol. 5, 223; Al-Kāshānī, *Zubah*, vol. 6, 245; Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr Al-Manthūr*, vol. 8, 15; Al-Fayḍ Al-Kāshānī, *Al-'Asfā'*, vol. 2, 1138, 1418, vol. 4, 386; Haqqī Al-Burūsawī n.d., vol. 8, 358–359; Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr Al-Madīd*, vol. 5, 239; Al-Maẓharī, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 8, 342; Shubbar, *Al-Jawhar*, vol. 5, 417; Al-'Ālūsī, *Rūh Al-Ma'ānī*, vol. 13, 71; Al-Shawkānī, *Faṭḥ*, vol. 4, 630; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Irshād*, vol. 1, 495; Al-Hussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 15, 112; 'Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 4, 65; Ibn 'Āshūr 1376, vol. 25, 229; Al-Husainī Al-Shāh 'Abdul'aḍīmī, *Ithnā'asharī*, vol. 11, 460; Al-Mughniyyah, *Al-Kāshif*, vol. 6, 541, n.d., vol. 1, 748; Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 25, 77; Al-Janābīzī, *Bayan Al-Sa'ādah*, vol. 4, 54; Al-'Āmilī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 7, 477; Al-Hussainī Al-Shirāzī, *Taqrīb*, vol. 5, 55; Al-Sa'dī, 1408, vol. 1, 920; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 6, 345; Nawawī Al-Jāwī, *Murāḥ*, vol. 2, 381; Al-Ḥā'irī Al-Tehrānī 1377, vol. 10, 46; Al-Ṭabāṭabā'i, *Al-Mizān*, vol. 18, 90; Al-Zahīlī, *Al-Munīr*, vol. 25, 132.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' Al-Bayān*, vol. 25, 35; Al-Tha'ālībī Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Kashf*, vol. 8, 331; Al-Rāzī, *Mafāṭīḥ*, vol. 27, 624; Al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim*, vol. 4, 156; Al-Maybudī, *Kashf Al-'Asrār*, vol. 9, 55; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4, 243; Al-Ṭabarsī, *Jawāmi'*, vol. 4, 63; Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 5, 88; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 4, 107; Al-'Andalusī, *Al-Baḥr*, vol. 9, 363; Al-Fayḍ Al-Dakānī, *Sawāṭi'*, vol. 5, 132; Al-Kāshānī, *Manhaj Al-Ṣādiqīn*, vol. 8, 241; Al-Kāshānī, *Khulaṣah*, vol. 5, 223; Al-'Āmilī, *Al-Wajīz*, vol. 3, 172; Al-Kāshānī, *Al-Mu'in*, vol. 3, 1315–1316; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 4, 70; Haqqī Al-Burūsawī n.d., vol. 8, 358–359; Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr Al-Madīd*, vol. 5, 239; Shubbar, *Al-Jawhar*, vol. 5, 417, 1412, 459; Al-Maẓharī, *Al-Tafsīr*, vol. 8, 324; Al-'Ālūsī, *Rūh Al-Ma'ānī*, vol. 13, 71; Al-Shawkānī, *Faṭḥ*, vol. 4, 630.

¹⁰⁶ Al-Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān*, vol. 17, 157; Nakhjawānī, *Al-Fawāṭiḥ*, vol. 2, 297.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Rāzī, *Mafāṭīḥ*, vol. 2, 624; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4, 243; Al-Baghdādī, *Lubāb*, vol. 4, 107; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 7, 204; Al-Nakhjawānī, *Al-Fawāṭiḥ*, vol. 2, 297; Al-Fayḍ Al-Dakānī, *Sawāṭi'*, vol. 5, 132; Al-Sharīf Al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 4, 70; Haqqī Al-Burūsawī n.d., vol. 8, 358–359; Al-'Ālūsī, *Rūh Al-Ma'ānī*, vol. 13, 71.

¹⁰⁸ Al-Husainī Al-Shāh 'Abdul'aḍīmī, *Ithnā'asharī*, vol. 11, 460; Al-Sabzawārī Al-Najafī, *Al-Jadīd*, vol. 6, 345, 1419, vol. 1, 495; Al-Hussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 15, 112; 'Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 4, 65; Ibn 'Āshūr 1376, vol. 25, 299; Al-Mughniyyah,

2. Women's fundamental shortcomings; ornaments worn by women are a sign of the shortcomings.¹⁰⁹ Some wrote that excess use of ornaments, instead of using them moderately, is a shortcoming.¹¹⁰ Some use offensive words for women to defend Allah and the angels: "Infidels committed three blasphemies: first, they ascribed children to Allah. Second, they ascribed the lower type of child, that is, a girl, to Him. Third, they consider angels to be women. This is a humiliation and an offense to the angels."¹¹¹

Progressive exegeses presented other reasons:

1. Women's feelings overcome their intellect.¹¹²
2. Women's shame and modesty.¹¹³
3. Women grow up wearing ornaments and this makes them ignorant toward education and learning.¹¹⁴

Progressive exegeses have demonstrated a change in point of view about women, in comparison with earlier exegeses:

1. The verse ascribes "inconspicuous in disputes" to most women but there are, of course, exceptions.¹¹⁵
2. The verse is not about all women. It refers to poor girls who were buried by their cruel fathers in pre-Islamic Arab lands.¹¹⁶
3. The verse describes the infidels' opinion of women, not the truth.¹¹⁷
4. The verse is not a humiliation for women. Allah has created women differently. The creature of Allah cannot be His child and His type. The same expression can be said of men; men who need to eat, drink and have sex cannot be Allah's children and his type.¹¹⁸

Traditional exegetes saw potentiality in this verse for other exegeses.¹¹⁹ They illustrate their image of woman when they speak of her stupidity and essential shortcomings. Traditional views on women using ornaments show cultural elements of *Tafsir*. Traditionalists repeat the earlier centuries' ideas. These two groups had the inferiority of woman as an exegetical assumption.

Progressives do not consider the verse to be about inferiority at all. They do not interpret the quality of being inconspicuous as a general feminine quality. The fact that some women are successful in speaking in debates, and their assumption of equality of man and woman in human worth resulted in such different exegetical views.

Al-Kāshif, vol. 6, 541; Al-Marāghī, *Tafsir*, vol. 25, 77; Nawawī Al-Jāwī, *Murāḥ*, vol. 2, 381; Al-Ḥā'irī Al-Tehrānī, *Muqtanayāt*, vol. 10, 46; Al-Zahīlī, *Al-Munir*, vol. 25, 132.

109 Al-Ḥussainī Al-Hamidānī, *Anwār*, vol. 15, 112; Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 4, 65; Al-Marāghī, *Tafsir*, vol. 25, 77; Nawawī Al-Jāwī, *Murāḥ*, vol. 2, 381; Al-Ḥā'irī Al-Tehrānī, *Muqtanayāt*, vol. 10, 46; Al-Zahīlī, *Al-Munir*, vol. 25, 132.

110 Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Al'Amthal*, vol. 16, 27.

111 Āl Ghāzī, *Bayān*, vol. 4, 66.

112 Al-Ḥussainī Al-Shirāzī, *Tabyīn*, vol. 1, 503, 1424, vol. 5, 55; Bānū'Amīn, *Makhzan*, vol. 13, 12; Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mizān*, vol. 18, 90; Makārim Al-Shirāzī 1421, vol. 16, 17, 1374, vol. 21, 28; Qarashī, *Aḥsan Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 10, 17; Al-Zahīlī, *Al-Munir*, vol. 25, 132; Qirā'atī, *Nūr*, vol. 10, 442.

113 Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Al'Amthal*, vol. 16, 27, 1374, vol. 21, 28.

114 Al-Karamī Al-Ḥuwayzī, *Al-Tafsir*, vol. 7, 145; Faḍlullāh, *min Wahy*, vol. 20, 222.

115 Haqqī Al-Burūsawī n.d., vol. 8, 358–359; Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsir*, vol. 13, 116; Bānū'Amīn, *Makhzan*, vol. 13, 12; Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Al'Amthal*, vol. 16, 17, 1374, vol. 21, 29; Al-Karamī Al-Ḥuwayzī, *Al-Tafsir*, vol. 7, 145.

116 Al-Ṭayyib, *Aṭṭayab*, vol. 12, 13.

117 Mirzā Khusravānī, *Tafsir*, vol. 7, 390; Sayyid Quṭb, *fi Ḍilāl*, vol. 5, 3181; Bānū'Amīn, *Makhzan*, vol. 13, 12; Hijāzī, *Al-Wāḍiḥ*, vol. 3, 389; Thaqaṭī Tehrānī, *Ravān-e Javid*, vol. 4, 598; Ṣafī 'Alī Shāh, *Ṣafī*, vol. 1, 679.

118 Qarashī, *Aḥsan Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 10, 17.

119 Moses and idols.

4 Analysis and conclusion

The exegeses of three verses reported in detail in this paper are a rich source for drawing Muslim scholars' views of women and the change that has occurred in interpretation over time. There is no meaningful difference between Sunni and Shia exegeses on this problem during the centuries. The exegeses show no difference until the twentieth century. A woman, in exegeses of the previous 13 centuries, was described as someone who had few duties and rights, while her endeavors in housewifery, childbearing and child raising were ignored. Due to her few rights and extremely limited freedom, man was called owner and absolute ruler over her. Woman, in their writings, had a shortcoming in her intellect and in her degree of humanity. She was created from the left rib of man; thus, man was major and original and woman was minor and the second gender. Looking at the historical extension of patriarchal thought in exegeses, we find that women's weaknesses in faith and virtues are described as the result of her shortcomings in intellect and nature. The final characteristic of women used as justification for their inferiority in *these exegeses* is women's inability to reach human perfection, in contrast to men who can.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are known as a period of change in Islamic values that came about because of increased literacy among women, industrialization requiring women in the workforce, globalization and the spread of knowledge and ideas, human rights discourse emerging in the wake of devastating wars and increased awareness of economic inequality around the world. We see women's movements and an improvement of women's situation in life. The improvement in their life and education led women to demand their rights. They conceived a new femininity and challenged all past conceptions of a woman, both theoretically and practically.¹²⁰ On the other hand, due to their more or less patriarchal content, various religions are criticized as a result of social progress and the change in women's rights and demands.¹²¹ Among other religions, the Islamic heritage, including Islamic philosophy, theology, jurisprudence and Qur'anic exegesis, was confronted with different and somewhat opposing viewpoints on women's issues. The theoretical reaction of every Islamic discipline ought to be studied separately.

The turning point in the exegetical history of these verses is found from the twentieth century onward. The exegete of this time faced a dilemma. The exegetical and jurisprudential tradition of the previous 13 centuries had evidently and undoubtedly pictured women as weak, unintelligent and inferior to men. On the other hand, new perspectives on women and newly acknowledged feminine qualities forced exegetes to reconsider the interpretation of the holy texts. An increasing number of critiques of Islamic traditional teachings on woman¹²² caused contemporary, thoughtful Muslim exegetes to reconsider traditional hermeneutics. The exegetes' responses during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have varied, as described earlier, and two main tendencies are notable: traditionalist and progressive.

The traditionalist tendency was for some traditional patriarchal ideas to be maintained and other views to be disregarded but without any criticism or rejection. Terminology and literature changed, although the content remained almost the same as the traditional exegeses. Strong terms such as imprisoned, enslaved, inferior and unintelligent were used less frequently. The concept of women being "inferior in intellect" was more commonly described as women having the tendency for emotions that overwhelm her intellect. Sometimes the claim of inferiority of a woman's intellect was described in scientific language, for example, the size and weight of a woman's brain and heart are smaller than a man's. Exegetes from this era still believed in the superiority of man's rights and, in some cases, man's nature and creation. What is obvious is that exegetes from this era began to omit the strongly negative terminology that could not withstand the contemporary critiques they were facing. General claims of superiority of every man over every woman from the previous era were rewritten in a softer manner, using majority terminology rather than exclusive terms. It can be deduced that the exegetes advocating this tendency either dismissed women's contemporary situation and demands or stood against them,

¹²⁰ Brown, "Islam and Feminism", 75–86.

¹²¹ Bodman and Tohidi, *Woman*; Winter, "Theoretical Issues".

¹²² Ali, *Sexual Ethics*, xiv.

defending both women's inferiority and Islamic traditional viewpoints from the literature of antecedent exegetes. The solution they proposed for the problems of women was to follow the "true" teachings of Islam, accepting their differences and to cease imitating "western women".¹²³ The elevated position that Islam gifted to women is never achievable by living the western way.

The progressive tendency of exegetes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is to reread and reevaluate the existing Qur'anic exegeses and *ḥadīths* and to present new theories about women. The verses that had been considered to proclaim the inferiority of women were reinterpreted to be compatible with the concept of equality of men and women. These exegetes used contemporary facts about women, historical examples, literal and contextual points and other Qur'anic verses to present their new insights. *Ḥadīths*, which have always been one of the bases of exegetical understanding, have been reevaluated by these exegetes. Earlier exegeses quoted some *ḥadīths* to prove their claim of women's inferiority. Contemporary exegeses questioned some of these *ḥadīths*, either their ascription to the source of the *ḥadīth* or transmitters, and some for their content when compared with Qur'anic teachings. They limit the applicability (*dilālah*) of some *ḥadīths* to a specific time, place or situation. Some *ḥadīths* are ignored in these contemporary exegeses without any critique despite their common use during earlier exegeses. Exegetes search the enormous treasure of Islamic *ḥadīths* and choose and quote *ḥadīths* to support their claims. Some of the newly quoted *ḥadīths* refer to the value and importance of women, the earlier coming to faith of many women when compared with their husbands in the time of Prophet Muhammad, and the sexual rights of wives.

Progressives have formulated many theories and their justification for them varies from one to another. Equality of men's and women's rights is proposed despite the differences in their rights, natures and spiritual lives. Differences in men's and women's rights are not considered a sign of superiority. Superiority is described as two sided. Women are superior in some respects, like their feelings, and men in others, like their intellect; their roles are different.¹²⁴ These theories admit that women, in reality, are mostly inferior, but they also make it clear the inferiority is not intrinsic, rather it is the result of women's poor upbringing and situation.¹²⁵

Some possible hermeneutical explanations can be proposed for such an evolution in exegetical ideas in the twentieth century:

- (1) The traditional and traditionalist exegeses are incorrect in their description of women's nature and the progressive exegetical ideas are correct. Traditional exegeses ascribed to woman characteristics that are not part of her essence, such as inferiority and weakness in intellect and virtues. Accepting this explanation, one should consider the factors of success or failure in "correct exegesis". Exegetes reached their conclusions through consideration of their linguistic and literary understanding of the passage of study, *ḥadīths* and other verses in the Qur'an as well as social facts, the facts that support the exegetes' ideas in their real-life. For instance, when exegetes proposed the inferiority of women in past centuries, social facts, i.e., real women of their time, supported it. Should any other consideration be added? Was it possible for them to write a correct exegesis pre-fourteenth century? If yes, what was the missing factor? It seems that none of these questions has a convincing answer. If no, how can it be reconciled with the Muslim belief that the Qur'an is the eternal message of Allah for all people,¹²⁶ in all times and places,¹²⁷ which contains every detail of truth?¹²⁸
- (2) Progressive exegeses with new interpretations are incorrect. If true, then fundamental views of traditional and traditionalist exegetes should be accepted as genuine Islamic ideas. Islam should

¹²³ See for instance: Sayyid Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 49–53.

¹²⁴ Hijāzī, *Al-Wāḍiḥ*, vol. 1, 370; Bānū'Amin, *Makhzan*, vol. 4, 63; Makārim Al-Shirāzī, *Al'Amthal*, vol. 3, 218; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-Balāgh*, vol. 1, 84; Al-Ṣādiqī Al-Tehrānī, *Al-furqān*; Muṣṭafawī, *Roshan*, vol. 5, 361; Qarashī, *Aḥsan Al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 2, 354.

¹²⁵ For instance, Jawādī Āmulī, Zan.

¹²⁶ "And we have not sent you but to all the men (34:28)."

¹²⁷ "It [Qur'an] is only a reminder to [everybody in] the Universe (6:90)."

¹²⁸ "And we revealed this Holy Book to you explaining everything (16:89)."

admit and defend its beliefs as a patriarchal religion and teach the inferiority of women. This explanation would need to solve the contradiction between patriarchy and some verses of the Qur'an such as (49:13), (4:124), (33:35) and (4:32) that speaks of equality of human worth regardless of race and gender. It must also deal with the contemporary demands of Muslim women, like justice.¹²⁹

- (3) Both exegetical views, inferiority and equality (or at least the difference between the genders with no superiority), are correct. How can these contradictory understandings both be correct? A simple, but possible, answer is that earlier exegetes described women of past centuries and contemporary exegetes have described contemporary women. The exegetes consciously or subconsciously see themselves and their societies in the mirror of Qur'an verses.

It may be estimated that majority of Muslim women of past ages had the negative described qualities as we don't see active women in social areas, though the effect of theory leading to an action should not be ignored. For example, if women are considered inferior by society, they will consequently be limited by society in their ability to develop their intellect and virtues. The theory caused an action that will then lead to a second theory, for example, women's essential inability to gain human perfection and then to a third theory, etc. This chain was broken in the twentieth century. Women's situation changed in both theory and practice. These theories and facts are affecting Qur'anic exegeses on women's issues. On the other hand, the Qur'an has the potential for different interpretations. Some have not seen the polysemy of the Qur'an as a threat but as an opportunity to harmonize present human needs with the eternal text of the Qur'an.¹³⁰

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¹²⁹ Wadud, *Gender Jihad*.

¹³⁰ Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence*.

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