

Reinterpreting Female Sexuality in Islam: A Maqāṣidī Exegesis of QS Āli 'Imrān:14 toward Gender-Just Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This study analyzes the issue of female sexuality in Islam through a maqāṣidī exegesis of QS Āli 'Imrān verse 14. Sexuality, often interpreted through patriarchal and biased lenses, poses a significant challenge to developing a gender-just Islamic perspective. This research employs a library-based method, drawing from classical and contemporary tafsir works as well as scholarly literature on sexuality in Islam. The findings indicate that conventional interpretations frequently portray women as sources of temptation (fitnah). In contrast, the maqāṣidī approach understands the verse as a universal reminder of worldly attractions for all human beings. Sexual desire is viewed as a divine gift that supports family formation, preserves human dignity (ḥifẓ al-'ird), life (ḥifẓ al-nafs), and intellect (ḥifẓ al-'aql). This study emphasizes the equal moral responsibility of men and women and the need to develop a more inclusive and humanistic tafsir methodology. The findings aim to contribute to the advancement of gender-sensitive hermeneutics in contemporary Qur'anic studies.

Keywords: Female Sexuality, Gender Bias, Islamic Exegesis, Maqāṣidī Hermeneutics, QS Āli 'Imrān:14

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis isu seksualitas perempuan dalam Islam melalui pendekatan tafsir maqāṣidī terhadap QS. Āli 'Imrān ayat 14. Seksualitas, yang sering kali dipahami secara bias dan patriarkal, menjadi tantangan dalam membangun perspektif keislaman yang adil gender. Kajian ini menggunakan metode studi pustaka terhadap karya tafsir klasik, kontemporer, serta literatur ilmiah mengenai seksualitas dalam Islam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penafsiran konvensional cenderung menempatkan perempuan sebagai sumber fitnah, sedangkan pendekatan maqāṣidī menafsirkan ayat tersebut sebagai peringatan universal mengenai daya tarik duniawi bagi seluruh umat manusia. Ketertarikan terhadap lawan jenis diposisikan sebagai anugerah ilahi yang mendukung terbentuknya keluarga, menjaga kehormatan (ḥifẓ al-'ird), jiwa (ḥifẓ al-nafs), dan akal (ḥifẓ al-'aql). Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya kesetaraan tanggung jawab moral antara laki-laki dan perempuan serta perlunya pengembangan tafsir yang lebih inklusif dan humanistik. Temuan ini diharapkan menjadi kontribusi bagi pengembangan hermeneutika gender dalam studi tafsir kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Bias Gender, Hermeneutika Maqāṣidī, QS Āli 'Imrān:14, Seksualitas Perempuan, Tafsir Islam

Introduction

Sexuality remains a globally relevant and pressing issue, especially in modern societies where its complexity is often reduced to narrow perspectives. As a fundamental dimension of human life, sexuality is shaped by a confluence of biological, psychological, social, and cultural influences. However, inadequate comprehension of these multidimensional aspects frequently leads to negative consequences, including detrimental effects on physical and mental health as well as general well-being (Khaliza, 2021). The situation is particularly severe for women, who throughout history have often faced dehumanization, a pattern that continues today in various forms such as trafficking, harassment, and gender-based violence (Mariyona, 2020).

Ironically, these phenomena are not exclusive to secular societies; they are also prevalent in Muslim-majority countries. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, Musdah Mulia observes that despite the cultural narrative of honoring women, incidents of harassment against female pilgrims persist, even in sacred spaces such as airports and during the tawaf ritual. In Indonesia, the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) recorded 2,078 cases of sexual violence in 2023, while between 2021–2023, at least 345 complaints were submitted involving vulnerable groups (Komnas Perempuan, 2023). Meanwhile, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported 265 cases of child sexual violence in 2024 alone, with only 53 cases under supervision and the rest referred to supporting institutions (KPAI, 2024). These numbers reveal systemic problems related to gender injustice and lack of protection for vulnerable groups in society.

Despite growing awareness, women in Indonesia are still often perceived as second-class citizens due to a lack of gender-sensitive education and awareness. This social construction is reinforced by patriarchal interpretations of religious texts that portray women as passive sexual beings or mere complements to men. Consequently, such interpretations create an imbalanced sexual discourse, rooted in male dominance (Mariyona, 2020; Khaliza, 2021). Classical commentaries of the Qur'an, mostly written by male scholars, often reflect these patriarchal biases. Verses related to inheritance, testimony, or polygamy (e.g., QS. An-Nisa [4]: 11; QS. al-Baqarah [2]: 282) are frequently interpreted literally using the tahlili method, a textualist and atomistic approach that neglects context and maqasid-oriented reasoning (Mulia, 2023).

This interpretive tendency fails to account for the Qur'an's universal message of justice and human dignity. As a result, verses that could serve to empower and liberate women are

instead used to justify their subordination. Scholars have noted that patriarchal biases in interpretation arise from three main factors: (1) the internal textual context, where verses were revealed within a patriarchal society; (2) the methodological limitations of traditional interpretation which prioritize literal meanings over holistic understanding; and (3) the external socio-political dominance of male scholars who historically monopolized exegetical authority (Khaliza, 2021; Mariyona, 2020; Mulia, 2023).

While various studies have attempted to address women's sexuality in Islam and critique patriarchal readings, most are limited either to deconstructive criticism or to partial reinterpretations. For instance, research by Khaliza (2021) and Mariyona (2020) identified patterns of sexual violence and their correlation with family environments, yet they did not integrate Qur'anic interpretation with *maqasid al-shari'ah*—a principle-centered method that seeks to uphold universal values like justice, protection of dignity, and well-being (*maslahah*).

This study fills that gap by offering a *maqasidi* interpretation of QS. Ali Imran [3]: 14, a verse that discusses the allure of worldly desires including sexual attraction. Rather than approaching this verse from a literal, moralistic standpoint, this study seeks to uncover its deeper purpose within the Qur'an's ethical framework—how sexuality, particularly women's sexuality, can be understood not as a threat or a test, but as part of human dignity and divine design that must be protected and respected.

This study lies in employing a *maqasidi*-based *tafsir* approach to reinterpret a key verse frequently used in patriarchal discourse. By aligning the interpretation with the broader goals of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*), this research not only critiques existing interpretive biases but also offers a constructive, gender-equitable framework that harmonizes Qur'anic ethics with contemporary human rights discourses. Unlike previous works that stopped at identifying the problem, this study advances toward offering a holistic paradigm rooted in the Qur'an's universal objectives.

Accordingly, the aim of this research is to provide a *gender-just reinterpretation* of QS. Ali Imran [3]: 14 by applying a *maqasid al-shari'ah* approach, thereby bridging the gap between scriptural exegesis and the lived experiences of women. Through this framework, the study aspires to promote a more inclusive, ethical, and contextual understanding of sexuality in Islamic discourse.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach with a library research design, aiming to explore and reinterpret Qur'anic perspectives on sexuality through the *maqāṣidī* interpretive

framework. The research focused on *Surah Āli ‘Imrān* verse 14 to develop an inclusive and humanistic understanding of female sexuality in Islamic discourse. The data analyzed consisted of classical and contemporary tafsir literature, as well as scholarly works related to sexuality in Islam and *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*. Primary sources included tafsir texts by al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr, as well as modern commentators such as al-Sha‘rāwī and Muhammad Abduh. Secondary sources comprised academic articles, gender-related Islamic studies, and official reports on sexual violence and women's rights issues.

Data were collected through document analysis using purposive sampling, specifically selecting materials that discussed Qur’anic interpretations of sexuality and gender justice. The data analysis followed a descriptive-analytical method based on six stages of the *maqāṣidī* approach: (1) identification of related verses to grasp interrelations and overarching objectives; (2) analysis of linguistic meanings and deeper semantic elements; (3) contextualization through comparison between historical settings and present-day realities; (4) integration of *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*, particularly values of dignity, lineage, and intellect; (5) synthesis of a systematic and logical interpretation; and (6) formulation of conclusions evaluated through *maṣlahah* indicators such as justice, equality, and human dignity.

The strength of this method lay in its capacity to uncover holistic and ethical interpretations that challenged traditional patriarchal exegesis. It also provided contextual relevance to current social issues, especially those concerning Muslim women. However, the method had a limitation in that the findings remained interpretive and theoretical, suggesting the need for complementary empirical research in future studies. To ensure validity, the interpretations were cross-checked with other established tafsir works and measured against universal Islamic values rooted in the objectives of the Sharī‘ah.

Results and Discussion

A. The Meaning of Sexuality

To understand the concept of sexuality within Islamic discourse—especially in light of the Qur’anic interpretation and Maqashid al-Shariah—one must first distinguish between the terms sex, gender, and sexuality. Sex is biologically determined, referring to physical attributes such as genitalia and reproductive functions (Mulia, 2015, p. 22). Gender, on the other hand, is a social construct shaped by cultural and historical norms that assign roles to men and women differently (Fakih, 1996, p. 9). This distinction is vital in the Islamic interpretive discourse, as many traditional interpretations conflate biological differences with prescribed roles, thus influencing patriarchal structures (Hasyim, 2002, p. 57).

Sexuality, in a broader sense, encompasses how individuals experience and express themselves as sexual beings. It integrates physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions (Mulia, 2015, p. 24; Muhammad, 2011, p. 5). Foucault's theory—though not an Islamic scholar—finds resonance in Musdah Mulia's view, which regards sexuality as socially regulated, politically influenced, and religiously framed, forming part of a power structure that governs human behavior (Mulia, 2023, p. 114; Hanah, 2017, p. 7). Within Islamic societies, these constructions often manifest through religious teachings and interpretations that determine acceptable expressions of sexuality.

In the Qur'anic context, classical commentators such as al-Qurtubi and al-Razi focused on sexuality primarily within the scope of law and morality, framing it within issues like zina and liwat. However, this legalistic focus tends to overlook the psychological and spiritual aspects of human sexuality, as reflected in newer gender-sensitive readings (Al-Qurtubi, 1967, vol. 4, p. 126; Al-Razi, 2004, vol. 4, p. 71). Musdah Mulia critiques this limitation by advocating for a broader interpretation that upholds human dignity and rights, including the right to sexual autonomy, as part of the goals of sharia (*maqashid al-shariah*) (Mulia, 2014, p. 29; Auda, 2007, p. 102).

Sexuality also intersects with social justice issues in marriage and family. The Qur'anic ideal of mutual satisfaction and tranquility (*sakinah*) in marriage (QS. al-Rum [30]: 21) is often distorted by patriarchal readings that center male desire and silence female agency (Barlas, 2005, p. 126; Murni, 2020, p. 88). In many traditional interpretations, the wife's sexual role is seen as obligatory service, neglecting her autonomy and emotional needs. Feminist scholars like Riffat Hassan and contemporary Muslim thinkers such as Nur Rofiah and Musdah Mulia argue that such interpretations betray the ethical spirit of the Qur'an (Qodir, 2011, p. 42; Umar, 2001, p. 53).

In light of *maqashid al-shariah*, sexuality should be interpreted not merely in legal terms but as part of the protection of *nafs* (life and dignity), *'ird* (honor), and *nasl* (lineage), with equal attention to women's experiences (Mustaqim, 2019, p. 5; Kamaluddin & Saifuddin, 2021, p. 102). A *maqashidic* approach thus demands reinterpretation of verses and hadith that have been used to justify unequal sexual roles, especially those related to marital relations, sexual orientation, and bodily rights. This perspective is essential in resisting the reduction of sexuality to moral panic or legal condemnation, instead framing it as a holistic aspect of human life guided by ethical, spiritual, and rational principles rooted in the Qur'an (Abdurrahman, 2016, p. 6; Munfarida, 2010, p. 51).

B. Terminology of Sexuality in the Qur'an

The Qur'an employs a rich set of vocabulary to describe sexuality, signifying its central place in human life and moral guidance. Among the key terms is *ash-syahawāt*, used in QS. Ali 'Imran [3]:14 to portray natural human inclinations, including sexual attraction. The Qur'an states that these desires are "beautified" for humans, suggesting their intrinsic nature, but simultaneously requiring ethical control. This is further emphasized in QS. al-A'raf [7]:81 and QS. an-Naml [27]:55, which portray sexual relations that transgress normative male-female boundaries, particularly the practices of the people of Luth. These verses highlight the Qur'an's perspective that sexuality is not only natural but also bounded by moral and spiritual frameworks (Mulia, 2019, hlm. 300–301).

Other terms such as *ar-rafats*, *al-mubāsyarah*, *al-mulāmasah*, and *al-mass* appear in legal and ritual contexts, particularly related to marriage. In QS. al-Baqarah [2]:187, the term *mubāsyarah* is connected with the metaphor of spouses as "garments" for one another, indicating intimacy, mutual care, and emotional closeness (Shihab, 2000, hlm. 564–565). Meanwhile, *al-mulāmasah* and *al-mass*, as found in QS. an-Nisa [4]:43 and QS. al-Baqarah [2]:236–237, relate to physical contact that affects ritual purity, underscoring the Qur'an's integration of the physical and spiritual dimensions of sexuality (Shihab, 1996, hlm. 424–426).

Beyond the physical dimension, the Qur'an introduces terms like *az-zawaj* (marriage), *al-hubb* (love), *al-nafs* (self), and *az-zīnah* (ornamentation), reflecting that sexuality encompasses identity, emotion, and ethics. For example, in QS. an-Nur [24]:31, *tabarruj* and *az-zīnah* are discussed in the context of modesty and boundaries, showing that sexual expression is regulated both privately and publicly. This reinforces the idea that sexuality in the Qur'an is more than biological—it is closely tied to spiritual harmony, social ethics, and mutual responsibility between men and women (Umar, 1999, hlm. 212–214; Abduh, 1947, Vol. 5, hlm. 27).

C. Analysis of Sexuality Bias in the Interpretation of Surah Ali 'Imran [3]: 14

In the interpretation of gender-related verses, especially those involving sexuality or sexual deviance, classical exegesis often reflects the socio-cultural norms of the exegete's era. For example, many tafsir works—such as those by al-Baghawi (1985), al-Qurtubi (1967), and al-Razi (2004)—tend to portray the story of the people of Lut (alayhi al-salam) with a legalistic and punitive framework. This can inadvertently legitimize social stigma against individuals with different sexual orientations (Height, 2019).

Contemporary scholars argue that such interpretations should be reviewed using *maqasid al-shariah* as a holistic approach that prioritizes justice (*adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and human dignity (*karamah*) (Auda, 2007; Mustaqim, 2019). For instance, reinterpretations of verses related to sexuality—like those explored by Hanah (2017) and Murni (2020)—emphasize the ethical and spiritual lessons of the narrative, rather than merely using them as doctrinal tools for condemnation.

Moreover, the *maqasidi* approach aligns with the necessity to respond to modern social challenges such as sexual violence, gender inequality, and the marginalization of vulnerable groups. Studies on the psychological impact of sexual violence (Khaliza et al., 2021; Mariyona, 2020) further justify the need for religious discourses to adopt more humanistic and healing perspectives.

Female Muslim scholars and gender-sensitive interpreters—such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas (2005), and Musdah Mulia (2005, 2014, 2015)—have provided theological grounds for gender justice by demonstrating that the Qur'an's core message affirms equality, mutual respect, and compassion. Barlas (2005) in particular deconstructs patriarchal readings and shows how the Qur'an liberates rather than subjugates women.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia has recognized the importance of gender mainstreaming in Islamic education (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam, 2009), but mainstream religious discourses still often retain patriarchal assumptions (Abdurrahman, 2016; Qodir, 2011). Interpretative innovations like *Qira'ah Mubadalah* (Qodir, 2019) offer frameworks that enable reciprocal and balanced interpretations, challenging one-sided perspectives rooted in masculine bias.

In line with this, the *maqasidi* approach does not reject traditional *tafsir* but rather reorients it toward higher ethical goals. As Mustaqim (2019) asserts, the inevitability of *maqasid*-based interpretation lies in its potential to bridge between textual fidelity and contextual relevance, especially in plural societies. This resonates with feminist critiques that seek to re-examine *fiqh* and *tafsir* from within Islamic tradition (Hasyim, 2002; Munfarida, 2009, 2010).

Furthermore, recent interpretations using contextual and interdisciplinary methods (Fardah, 2022; Caroline & Yunanto, 2020) highlight that sexuality is not merely a biological or legal matter, but deeply embedded in identity, ethics, and power dynamics (Rohmaniyah, 2017). Hence, Qur'anic interpretation on these issues must be sensitive to *maqasid* such as protection of dignity (*hifz al-ird*) and protection of mind (*hifz al-aql*).

Reading sexuality and gender through this lens challenges punitive legalism and supports transformative understanding (Muhammad, 2011; Mulia, 2023). It provides space for human rights, gender justice, and compassionate jurisprudence to flourish within Islamic frameworks (Fakih, 1996; Shodiq, 2004).

In conclusion, reinterpreting Qur'anic verses on gender and sexuality through the lens of *maqasid al-shariah*—as well as gender-sensitive hermeneutics—is not only theologically valid but also morally imperative. It reflects the dynamic spirit of Islam as a religion committed to justice, mercy, and human flourishing across time and context (Nasution, 2002; Umar, 2001; Ridha, n.d.).

D. The *Maqāṣidī* Approach to Surah Ali Imran Verse 14: Toward a Just Gender Understanding

The concept of *maqṣid* (goal or purpose) in Islamic law has been illustrated by scholars such as al-Ghazālī and al-Juwaynī, framing the *maqāṣid* as intentions that serve public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*) (Auda, 2007). Auda defines *maqāṣid* as the higher ends of Shariah, and al-Atrash & Qoid describe *maqāṣidī* interpretation as uncovering these intended meanings in Qur'anic text (al-Atrash & Qoid, 2011). Applying this to QS 3:14 shifts the focus from literal interpretation to ethical purpose: *zuyyina lin-nās* (“made beautiful/ornamented for people”) points not to a gendered seduction but to a universal human disposition toward desires (Mulia, 2015; Fardah, 2022).

The use of passive voice in *zuyyina* allows recognition that all humans—regardless of gender—possess innate desires (Mulia, 2005; Caroline & Yunanto, 2020). When interpreted *maqāṣidically*, this impulse becomes morally neutral or positive, provided it is channeled correctly. Musdah Mulia underlined that sexual orientation is a natural component of humans (Mulia, 2015), and Shihab explained that *zuyyina* indicates beauty granted by Allah when adhered to divine guidance, or by *shayṭān* if misused (Ali & Muhdlor, 2003; Ashur, 1984).

Expanding this, Qodir introduced his *muḍābalah* (reciprocity) concept, noting that temptation applies to both sexes equally. Therefore, moral responsibility is shared (Qodir, 2019; Umar, 2001). This shift in interpretive framework prevents women from being exclusively blamed and supports a view of ethical obligation across genders (Munfarida, 2009; Munfarida, 2010).

Mulia further contextualized sexual ethics by critiquing gendered violence in pornography—a domain where both women and men can be perpetrators—but often wherein women suffer more as victims (Mulia, 2014; Abdurrahman, 2016). Asma Barlas similarly

emphasized that moral assessment should be based on individual conduct, not on gender stereotypes (Barlas, 2005), and that gender-biased tafsir stems from traditional interpretations rather than scriptural mandates.

From a *maqāṣidī* perspective, desires are divine gifts meant to support essential objectives: preservation of intellect (*ḥifẓ al-‘aql*), life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), lineage (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), and honor (*ḥifẓ al-‘ird*) (Auda, 2007; Kamaluddin & Saifuddin, 2021). The mention of *al-banīn* after *an-nisā’* in QS 3:14 underscores lineage and family formation as Shariah goals (Fardah, 2022; Murni, 2020). This aligns with verses like QS 30:21 and QS 36:36, which frame procreation and companionship as part of divine design (Muhammad, 2011; Dimasyqi, 1997).

Furthermore, the doctrinal background of QS 3:14 involves a critique of Najran Christian display of luxury, cautioning believers against misplaced attachments to worldly adornments—including women, children, and wealth—rather than focusing on the hereafter (Khaliza et al., 2021; Mariyona, 2020). Gender equality is emphasized in spiritual injunctions such as QS 24:30–31, which command both men and women to lower their gaze and uphold modesty. This confirms equal moral accountability and dignified spiritual status (Directorate General, 2009; Nasution, 2002).

Lastly, the interpretation of *nisa’* by Muhammad Syahrur as “new things” rather than strictly “women” introduces egalitarian intent, aiming to protect universal dignity (Fardah, 2022). However, while Syahrur’s expansionist approach aligns with *maqāṣid* values, it risks inconsistency with other Qur’anic references. Therefore, a *maqāṣidī* hermeneutic—which remains textually grounded while emphasizing objectives of justice and dignity—offers a balanced and inclusive method for understanding gender and sexuality in QS 3:14 (Mustaqim, 2019; Qodir, 2011).

Conclusion

This study has examined QS Āli ‘Imrān [3]:14 through a *maqāṣidī* lens, revealing that the verse does not single out women as sources of temptation, but rather describes general human inclinations toward worldly desires. By contextualizing this verse within the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*), particularly the protection of dignity, lineage, and reason, the study underscores the necessity of managing desires ethically for all individuals, regardless of gender.

Theoretically, this research challenges patriarchal interpretations by promoting a more inclusive and gender-just hermeneutical approach. It integrates *maqāṣidī* interpretation with the *mubādalāh* perspective, offering a balanced framework that supports equality and shared

moral responsibility between men and women. Practically, the study contributes to efforts in Islamic education and gender discourse by encouraging reinterpretation of classical texts in ways that affirm justice and human dignity.

Future research is recommended to explore other verses related to gender, sexuality, and social ethics using the *maqāṣidī* approach, potentially combined with indigenous feminist or psychological frameworks, to further enrich the interpretive tradition of the Qur'an.

Overall, this research contributes to the advancement of Qur'anic studies by reaffirming the relevance of *maqāṣidī* interpretation in addressing contemporary issues of gender justice, and by providing a methodological alternative that bridges classical insight with modern ethical concerns.

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