

Re-reading Gender-Related Verses through Qira'at Variation: Semantic and Legal-Interpretive Implications in Surat al-Nisa'

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana variasi qira'at dalam ayat-ayat terpilih terkait gender dalam Surah an-Nisa' membentuk ekspansi semantik serta konsekuensi legal-interpretatif dalam eksegesis Al-Qur'an. Studi ini dilatarbelakangi oleh bertahannya pembacaan monolitik terhadap ayat-ayat gender dalam diskursus Muslim kontemporer, khususnya pada isu-isu seperti poligami, kekerasan terhadap perempuan, otoritas rumah tangga, dan persentuhan fisik dalam konteks ritual. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian pustaka kualitatif, artikel ini menerapkan pendekatan tafsir Al-Qur'an dengan perhatian khusus pada tafsir tematik dan analisis qira'at. Unit analisis terdiri dari variasi bacaan dalam QS. an-Nisa' 4:3, 4:19, 4:34, dan 4:43. Data primer bersumber dari ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an yang relevan, karya-karya qira'at klasik, dan literatur tafsir, sedangkan data sekunder diambil dari studi ilmiah mengenai interpretasi gender dalam Al-Qur'an. Data dianalisis melalui analisis komparatif-tekstual dan interpretatif. Studi ini menemukan, pertama, bahwa variasi qira'at menghasilkan ekspansi semantik dengan membuka kemungkinan leksikal, relasional, dan etis yang lebih luas dalam ayat-ayat terkait gender. Kedua, perbedaan semantik tersebut menghasilkan konsekuensi legal-interpretatif yang berbeda, termasuk pembacaan yang lebih ketat mengenai poligami, perlindungan yang lebih luas terhadap kekerasan pada perempuan, pemahaman yang lebih resiprokal (timbang balik) tentang tanggung jawab rumah tangga, serta kemajemukan ketetapan hukum-ritual terkait persentuhan fisik. Ketiga, temuan ini mendukung pembacaan ulang ayat-ayat gender di luar kerangka interpretatif monolitik berbasis riwayat Hafsh. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pluralitas qira'at tidak seharusnya diperlakukan sebagai isu teknis perifer (pinggiran), melainkan sebagai sumber daya metodologis internal untuk interpretasi Al-Qur'an yang berwawasan gender secara lebih dialogis, kontekstual, dan berbasis teks secara mendalam.

Kata Kunci: *ayat gender; interpretasi hukum; qira'at; ekspansi semantik; Surah an-Nisa'; tafsir.*

Abstract

This article examines how qira'at variation in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa' shapes semantic expansion and legal-interpretive consequences in Qur'anic exegesis. The study is motivated by the persistence of monolithic readings of gender verses in contemporary Muslim discourse, particularly on issues such as polygamy, violence against women, household authority, and bodily contact in ritual contexts. Using a qualitative library research design, this article employs a Qur'anic exegesis approach with particular attention to thematic tafsir and qira'at analysis. The unit of analysis consists of variant readings in Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, 4:19, 4:34, and 4:43. Primary data are drawn from the relevant Qur'anic verses, classical qira'at works, and tafsir literature, while secondary data are taken from scholarly studies on gender-related Qur'anic interpretation. The data are analyzed through comparative-textual and interpretive analysis. The study finds, first, that qira'at variation produces semantic expansion by opening broader lexical, relational, and ethical possibilities in gender-related verses. Second, these semantic differences generate distinct legal-interpretive consequences, including stricter readings of polygamy, broader protections against violence toward women, more reciprocal understandings of household responsibility, and plural ritual-legal rulings concerning bodily contact. Third, these findings support a re-reading of gender verses beyond a monolithic Hafs-based interpretive framework. This article argues that qira'at plurality should be treated not as a peripheral technical issue, but as an internal methodological resource for more dialogical, contextual, and textually grounded gender-sensitive Qur'anic interpretation.

Keyword: gender verses; legal interpretation; qira'at; semantic expansion; Surat al-Nisa'; tafsir.

Introduction

Gender-related Qur'anic verses continue to occupy a central place in contemporary Muslim debates, especially in matters of polygamy, domestic violence, household leadership, and bodily relations in ritual contexts. These verses are not discussed only in academic settings, but also circulate in sermons, fatwas, classrooms, family advice, and everyday religious discourse, so their interpretation directly affects gender relations, family authority, and the social position of women. This urgency is inseparable from the broader reality of gender-based harm in contemporary society. Globally, nearly one in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2024), while in Indonesia the figure is reported at around one in four women, showing that questions of violence, power, and protection remain socially pressing rather than merely theoretical (Komnas Perempuan, 2025). In this context, Qur'anic verses related to women are repeatedly invoked not only as theological references, but also as normative grounds for

shaping attitudes toward marriage, obedience, bodily boundaries, and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of coercive practices.

At the same time, the problem is not simply that gender verses are debated, but that they are often approached through a dominant and seemingly self-evident interpretive horizon, making their meanings appear singular, final, and closed to alternative readings. Scholarship on Qur'anic gender interpretation has shown that verses on marriage, testimony, and gender roles were historically elaborated within increasingly male-dominated interpretive and legal hierarchies, even though those hierarchies were shaped by changing social and intellectual contexts rather than by one immutable exegetical logic (Bauer, 2015). In parallel, research on qira'at has argued that variant readings are crucial for approaching gender-related verses more adequately, since they preserve alternative semantic possibilities that are often flattened in dominant readings (Muttaqin, 2016). For that reason, the social-intellectual issue addressed in this article is not merely "gender in Islam," but the narrowing of the interpretive horizon of gender-related verses through a dominant single-reading framework that risks simplifying the textual plurality of the Qur'an itself.

Previous studies may be grouped into three broad categories. First, a substantial body of scholarship treats qira'at as a scientific discipline in its own right, focusing on its historical formation, canonization, sanad authentication, and textual transmission. In this category, qira'at is primarily examined as part of the discipline of 'ulūm al-Qur'an, especially in relation to the authority of canonical readings and the scholarly processes that shaped their preservation (Muna & Munirul Ikhwan, 2023; Shah, 2020). Second, another group of studies has shown that qira'at differences affect the interpretation of Qur'anic verses and may also influence legal reasoning and the application of Islamic teachings. Research on family law verses, for example, demonstrates that qira'at diversity can shape legal interpretation in concrete juridical domains, while other studies show that variant readings affect meaning production and exegesis more broadly (Mustopa, 2024; Ummah, Gunarti, & Ahmadi, 2024). These two strands confirm that qira'at is not merely a technical matter of recitation, but also an important interpretive resource.

Third, a large body of scholarship on gender-related Qur'anic interpretation has examined women-related verses, patriarchal exegesis, and the critique of hierarchical readings, often through ethical, historical, or feminist hermeneutics. Such studies have shown that many verses concerning marriage, testimony, and gender roles were historically interpreted within male-dominated exegetical and legal frameworks (Bauer,

2015), while some more specific works have already highlighted the importance of qira'at theory for approaching gender verses more contextually (Muttaqin, 2016). However, these studies have not sufficiently examined the direct relationship between qira'at variation and selected gender-related verses in Surat al-Nisa', nor have they systematically shown how qira'at simultaneously shapes semantic expansion and legal-interpretive consequences in those verses. More importantly, few studies have used qira'at findings as an internal textual basis for questioning monolithic Hafsa-based readings from within the Islamic tradition itself. It is precisely this gap that the present article seeks to address.

This article aims to examine qira'at variation in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa', particularly Q. 4:3, 4:19, 4:34, and 4:43, in order to clarify how these variant readings shape both semantic expansion and legal-interpretive consequences. More specifically, the article seeks to show that qira'at variation does not merely multiply recitational forms, but also reconfigures the semantic and normative horizons through which gender-related verses are understood in tafsir and legal reasoning. By doing so, this study contributes to the growing scholarship on gender and Qur'anic interpretation by arguing that the re-reading of gender verses need not rely solely on external ethical critique, but can be grounded in the internal textual plurality of the qira'at tradition itself. In this sense, the article positions its analysis as a response to the gap in previous studies by demonstrating that selected gender-related verses in Surat al-Nisa' can be read beyond a monolithic interpretive framework when their qira'at variation is taken seriously.

This study employs a qualitative library research design with a Qur'anic exegesis approach, particularly thematic tafsir and qira'at analysis. The unit of analysis consists of variant readings in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa', namely Q. 4:3, 4:19, 4:34, and 4:43. Primary data were drawn from the relevant Qur'anic verses, classical qira'at works, and tafsir literature, while secondary data were obtained from scholarly studies on Qur'anic gender discourse and related academic articles. The data were collected through documentation and close textual reading, then analyzed using comparative-textual and interpretive analysis. The comparative-textual analysis was used to identify differences in variant readings and their semantic implications, while the interpretive analysis was used to examine how these variations shape broader exegetical and legal-interpretive consequences in gender-related Qur'anic discourse.

RESULTS

Qira'at Variation and Semantic Expansion in Gender Verses

The first finding of this study shows that qira'at variation in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa' demonstrates that the Qur'anic text does not operate through a single and closed semantic horizon. Within the discipline of qira'at, variant readings are not treated as arbitrary readerly inventions, but as an authoritative tradition concerned with the preservation and transmission of Qur'anic recitation based on established lines of transmission (Utsman, 1988, pp. 36–37). In this sense, qira'at functions as a legitimate textual gateway for identifying semantic plurality within the Qur'an. As al-Zarkashī explains, the Qur'an and qira'at are not identical in definition: the Qur'an is the revealed divine discourse, whereas qira'at refers to the variations in the pronunciation and articulation of that revealed discourse, whether in letters or modes of recitation (Al-Zarkasyī, 2006, p. 222; Al-Zarqānī, 2000, p. 17). Based on this conceptual foundation, the qira'at variants found in several gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa', as mapped in the qira'at tradition, indicate that these verses preserve more than one possible semantic direction, so that their meanings cannot be reduced to a monolithic reading alone (Al-Qādlī, 1981, pp. 75–89). Accordingly, the textual evidence examined in this study suggests that qira'at variation contributes to semantic expansion in ways that are directly relevant to the interpretation of gender verses.

To make the findings more analytically understandable, the semantic implications of qira'at variations in the selected gender-related verses are mapped in Table 1. This table provides a concise visualization of how different readings generate semantic shifts and broaden the interpretive scope of the verses before each case is discussed in greater detail.

Tabel 1 — Pemetaan Variasi Qira'at dan Perluasan Makna

Verse	Variant Reading	Core Semantic Contrast	Semantic Expansion	Main References
Q. 4:3	tuqsitū / taqsitū	fairness / injustice-neglect	justice expands into non-oppression, non-neglect, and preparedness	Al-Qurthuby, 2006, p. 25; `Atiyyah, 2001, p. 70; Al-Zamakhsyarī, 2009; Al-

				Andalusī, 2010, p. 504
Q. 4:19	karhan / kurhan; mubayyinah / mubayyanah	coercion / hatred- burden	prohibition expands from forced inheritance to abusive retention and humiliation	al-Jazari, 1992, p. 105; Al-Suyūṭī, 2003, pp. 234– 235; Al-Ṭabarī, 1994, p. 649; Al- Dimasyqī, 1998, p. 256
Q. 4:34	grammatical variation	divine safeguarding / active moral agency	piety broadens from passive status to ethical agency	Habsy, 2001, p. 185
Q. 4:43	lamastum / lāmastum	touch / mutual contact- intercourse	bodily relation read through multiple semantic levels	Rāzī, 1981, p. 115; Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, pp. 223– 224

In Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, the main semantic variation appears in the reading of the expression *tuqsitū* and *taqsitū*. According to al-Qurṭubī, the first reading derives from *aqsatha*, which means to act justly, whereas the second derives from *qasatha*, which conveys the sense of being unjust, cheating, or deviating from fairness; in this second reading, the particle *lā* is understood as *zā'idah*, so the expression points to the fear of acting unjustly toward women and orphans (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, p. 25). This distinction is also supported by al-Zamakhsharī and Ibn 'Aṭiyyah, who treat the two readings as carrying different semantic implications, although Abū Ḥayyān, citing al-Zajjāj, records the view that both may still converge on the broader sense of justice ('Atiyyah, 2001, p. 70; Al-Andalusī, 2010, p. 504; Al-Zamakhsharī, 2009).

This variation shows that the verse does not speak of justice only in a narrow and abstract sense, but opens a wider semantic field that also includes the avoidance of ظلم, neglect, and harmful treatment toward women and orphaned girls. In this respect, the second reading intensifies the ethical demand of the verse by suggesting that polygamy cannot be separated from the risk of injustice, abandonment, and failure of responsibility, thus making the condition more stringent before marriage is even undertaken (Widayati, 2015). Read in this way, qira'at variation expands the meaning of justice from a formal legal condition into a more complex moral responsibility, which is why several contemporary readings see this semantic widening as important

for gender-sensitive interpretation, even without turning the verse into a purely normative argument about monogamy (Al-Bukhārī, 1987, p. 47; Kodir, 2017, pp. 194–196, 2019, p. 423; Yusuf, 2008, p. 133).

In Q. al-Nisa' 4:19, semantic expansion is particularly visible in two textual points: the reading of *karhan/kurhan* and that of *fāḥishah mubayyinah/mubayyanah*. Al-Jazarī records that Ḥamzah, al-Kisā'ī, and Khalaf read *kurhan* with ḍammah on the kāf, whereas the other canonical readers recite *karhan* with fathah; in addition, Ibn Kathīr and 'Āṣim through Shu'bah read *mubayyanah* with fathah (Al-Jazarī, 1992, p. 105). As explained in the tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and transmitted by al-Suyūṭī, *karhan* points to coercion or compulsion, while *kurhan* refers to hatred, hardship, or burdensome treatment directed at women (Al-Suyūṭī, 2003, pp. 234–235). This semantic distinction is reinforced by al-Ṭabarī's account of women being retained until death for the sake of inheritance (Al-Ṭabarī, 1994, p. 649) and by Ibn 'Adil's explanation of a wife being neglected or restrained because of her husband's dislike toward her (Al-Dimasyqī, 1998, p. 256). The historical report on the Medinan practice of seizing widows as objects of male control also clarifies the social setting in which this prohibition emerged (Ath-Thabari, 2008, p. 645).

These qira'at variants show that the prohibition in this verse cannot be reduced to a single act of forcibly inheriting women, but instead opens a broader spectrum of violence against them. The semantic field of the verse expands from coercion to abusive retention, humiliation, dispossession, and confinement rooted in hatred or control. This broader horizon is further supported by the clause *ta'dulūhunna*, which classical exegetes connect to various forms of harming, constraining, and pressuring wives in order to reclaim property or deny them their rights (Al-Jaṣṣās, 1993, p. 157; Kathīr & Al-Ṣābūnī, 1981, p. 368; Munawwir, 1997, pp. 941–942). In this sense, the qira'at variation in Q. al-Nisa' 4:19 expands the verse from a narrow prohibition into a wider textual basis for recognizing physical, economic, and psychological violence against women, while later interpretive references only confirm that this semantic widening has real legal and ethical significance (Riḍā, 1947, p. 370; Rofiq, 2003, pp. 153–154).

Compared to the previous verses, Q. al-Nisa' 4:34 does not display as many qira'at variations, yet it still preserves an important semantic nuance in the phrase *bimā ḥafīẓa Allāh*. As noted in the draft, the main point lies not in a major lexical divergence but in a subtle grammatical shift that affects the position of agency within the verse. Habsy records that a particular reading changes the orientation of the phrase so that, in one construction, the meaning points more strongly to Allah's protection and safeguarding of

righteous women, whereas in another grammatical orientation the emphasis moves toward women's own active role in preserving the values and trust entrusted by God (Habsy, 2001, p. 185).

This small variation shows that the verse does not necessarily construct women only as passive objects within domestic ethics, but also opens a semantic possibility in which women appear as active moral agents. In that sense, the shift is not merely grammatical, because it changes the direction of emphasis from divine safeguarding alone to ethical participation and conscious moral responsibility. Even without turning this verse into a larger ideological debate, the textual evidence indicates that qira'at-sensitive reading allows Q. al-Nisa' 4:34 to be understood not only through passive piety, but also through the language of active righteousness and relational responsibility within the household.

In Q. al-Nisa' 4:43, the central semantic variation lies in the reading of *lamastum* and *lāmastum*. As noted in the draft, Ḥamzah, al-Kisā'ī, and Khalaf read the expression without the alif, whereas the other canonical readers recite it with the alif. This difference becomes significant because it affects the semantic range of bodily contact between men and women in the context of ritual purity. Al-Rāzī emphasizes that the basic meaning of *al-lams* is touch by hand, while the form built on the pattern of *mufā'alah* may indicate reciprocal bodily contact rather than automatically meaning sexual intercourse (Rāzī, 1981, p. 115). Al-Qurṭubī likewise shows that both readings generated multiple interpretive possibilities among the exegetes, including intercourse, ordinary skin contact, and meanings that accommodate both depending on context (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, pp. 223–224).

This variation indicates that Q. al-Nisa' 4:43 preserves a plural semantic horizon regarding male–female bodily relations within ritual discourse. The verse therefore cannot be reduced to a single fixed meaning, whether sexual intercourse alone, ordinary touch alone, or contact involving desire. Instead, qira'at variation broadens the interpretive field of the verse by showing that bodily interaction and ritual purity are articulated through layered semantic possibilities. In this respect, the verse provides strong evidence that qira'at contributes to semantic expansion in the domain of gendered embodiment, because the textual form itself sustains more than one legitimate interpretive direction.

In sum, the qira'at variations identified in the selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa' reveal a consistent pattern of semantic expansion rather than isolated lexical deviation. First, qira'at broadens meaning from a single and narrow lexical sense into multiple related semantic possibilities. Second, this broadening often moves from a minimal meaning toward more

complex relational and ethical implications, such as from “justice” to the avoidance of injustice and neglect, from “coercion” to hardship and abusive retention, from passive piety to active moral agency, and from simple touch to a plural field of bodily relations and ritual meaning. Third, within the context of gender verses, such plurality prevents a monolithic reading of the text and instead opens a more contextual and textually grounded interpretive horizon. Therefore, the first finding of this study demonstrates that qira’at variation in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa’ is semantically expansive and, for that reason, resists the reduction of these verses into a single interpretive direction.

Qira’at Differences and Legal-Interpretive Consequences

The second finding of this study demonstrates that qira’at differences in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa’ do not merely produce semantic expansion, but also generate distinct legal-interpretive consequences in the direction of tafsir and istinbāḥ. Once a variation in reading affects the substance of a word, it also affects how the verse is understood, delimited, and normatively applied, so that the same verse may be read in a stricter or more flexible manner, in a narrower or broader scope, in a more textual or more contextual orientation, and even in a more patriarchal or more reciprocal direction depending on the interpretive reasoning constructed from it. In this regard, al-Zarkasyi’s formulation is crucial, since he notes that qira’at differences tied to the substance of words can alter meaning, whereas those tied only to dialectal style do not necessarily do so (Al-Zarkasyi, 2003, p. 258). On that basis, the qira’at variants mapped in the gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa’, as preserved in the qira’at tradition, indicate that differences in recitation may also lead to differences in legal and interpretive orientation rather than remaining at the level of linguistic variation alone (Al-Qāḍī, 1981, pp. 75–89).

To make this second finding more analytically visible, the legal-interpretive consequences of qira’at variations in the selected gender-related verses are summarized in Table 2. This table provides a concise mapping of how different readings affect the scope, direction, and normative orientation of interpretation before each verse is discussed in greater detail.

Tabel 2 — Pemetaan Konsekuensi Tafsir-Hukum dari Variasi Qira'at

Vers e	Variant Reading	Immediate Semantic Shift	Legal-Interpretive Consequence	Main References
Q. 4:3	tuqsitū / taqsitū	justice / injustice-neglect	polygamy read not merely as fairness after marriage, but also as prior non-oppression and readiness	Al-Qurthuby, 2006, p. 25; `Atiyah, 2001, p. 70; Al-Andalusī, 2010, p. 504; Widayati, 2015
Q. 4:19	karhan / kurhan; mubayyin ah / mubayyan ah	coercion / hatred-abuse	prohibition extends from forced inheritance to abusive detention, deprivation, and violence against wives	al-Jazari, 1992, p. 105; Al-Suyūṭī, 2003, pp. 234–235; Al-Ṭabarī, 1994, p. 649; Rofiq, 2003, pp. 153–154
Q. 4:34	grammatical variation	passive safeguarding / active moral agency	household leadership interpreted less as absolute hierarchy and more as relational responsibility	Habsy, 2001, p. 185
Q. 4:43	lamastum / lāmastum	touch / intercourse or mutual touch	different legal rulings on wudu, tayammum, and bodily contact with women	Rāzī, 1981, p. 115; Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, pp. 223–224

In Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, the qira'at variation between *tuqṣitū* and *taqṣitū* affects not only the semantic range of justice, but also the legal-interpretive threshold through which the verse is normatively understood. Al-Qurṭubī explains that the first reading derives from *aqsatha*, which denotes acting justly, whereas the second derives from *qasatha*, which conveys injustice, cheating, or deviation from fairness; in the latter, the particle *lā* is treated as *zā'idah*, so the construction points to the fear of acting unjustly toward women and orphans (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, p. 25). This distinction is also affirmed by al-Zamakhsharī and Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, who regard the two readings as carrying different semantic implications, although Abū Ḥayyān, citing al-Zajjāj, records the position that both may still converge on the broader sense of justice (ʿAtīyyah, 2001, p. 70; Al-Andalusī, 2010, p. 504; Al-Zamakhsharī, 2009).

At the level of legal and interpretive consequence, however, the difference is more significant: if the first reading allows the condition of polygamy to be understood primarily as the capacity to act justly, the second reading tightens that condition by including the avoidance of neglect, harmful treatment, and failure of responsibility even before the marriage is undertaken. In this sense, Widayati's discussion is important because it shows that the alternative reading produces a stricter legal implication for those seeking to practice polygamy, especially by expanding the condition from abstract justice to concrete preparedness and non-oppression (Widayati, 2015). Read in this direction, the verse can no longer be reduced to a permissive formula of "polygamy is allowed as long as one is fair," since qira'at variation raises the legal-interpretive bar and opens a more restrictive ethical reading, a tendency that later gender-sensitive interpretations also reinforce without turning the verse into a purely polemical rejection of polygamy (Al-Bukhārī, 1987, p. 47; Kodir, 2017, pp. 194–196, 2019, p. 423; Yusuf, 2008, p. 133).

In Q. al-Nisa' 4:19, the qira'at variation provides one of the clearest examples of how differences in recitation generate broader legal-interpretive consequences. The key textual points remain the readings of *karhan/kurhan* and *mubayyinah/mubayyanah*, as already mapped in the draft (al-Jazari, 1992, p. 105). Ibn 'Abbās, as cited by al-Suyūṭī, distinguishes *karhan* as coercion or compulsion, whereas *kurhan* points to hatred, burden, and oppressive treatment directed toward women (Al-Suyūṭī, 2003, pp. 234–235). This distinction is reinforced by al-Ṭabarī, who refers to the detention of women until death for the sake of inheritance (Al-Ṭabarī, 1994, p. 649), and by Ibn 'Ādil, who explains that a wife may be neglected, restrained, or left to suffer because of her husband's dislike and material interest (Al-Dimasyqī, 1998, p. 256). The report on pre-Islamic and early Medinan practices of

seizing widows as objects of male control further clarifies that the verse addressed not only symbolic inheritance, but also concrete forms of domination over women's lives and property (Ath-Thabari, 2008, p. 645).

At the level of legal-interpretive consequence, these readings expand the scope of the verse from a narrow prohibition against inheriting women by force into a broader prohibition against structural violence. The verse can therefore be read not only as rejecting forced control over widows, but also as prohibiting abusive retention, deprivation of rights, coercion, humiliation, and other forms of violence motivated by control over women's bodies and property. This wider legal horizon is further supported by the interpretation of *ta'dulūhunna*, which exegetes link to harming, restricting, and pressuring wives in order to reclaim property or deny them their rights (Kathīr & Al-Ṣābūnī, 1981, p. 368; Munawwir, 1997, pp. 941–942; Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, 1993, p. 157). In this sense, the qira'at variation in Q. al-Nisa' 4:19 transforms the verse from a literal-social prohibition into a wider textual basis for protecting women from coercive control and structural abuse, with later interpretive and legal reflections only confirming the practical significance of this broader reading (Riḍā, 1947, p. 370; Rofiq, 2003, pp. 153–154).

In Q. al-Nisa' 4:34, the qira'at evidence is more limited than in the previous verses, yet it remains significant for legal-interpretive analysis because even a minor variation in recitation may affect the position of agency within the verse. As preserved in the draft, the relevant point concerns the phrase related to the safeguarding of righteous women, where a slight grammatical variation recorded by Habsy alters the orientation of meaning: one reading emphasizes that righteous women are protected and safeguarded by Allah, while the other allows the phrase to be understood in a way that highlights women's own active role in preserving divine values and ethical trust (Habsy, 2001, p. 185).

At the level of legal and interpretive consequence, this variation means that Q. al-Nisa' 4:34 does not automatically lock its meaning into a model of unilateral male hierarchy within the household. Rather, the shift in grammatical orientation opens the possibility of reading domestic relations not only as a structure of authority, but also as a framework of reciprocal moral responsibility in which ethical agency is not monopolized by the husband alone. In this sense, the qira'at-sensitive reading of the verse subtly repositions debates on *qawwām*, provision, and household leadership, showing that the interpretive consequence of qira'at may lie not only in technical rulings, but also in the normative orientation through which gender relations are understood.

In Q. al-Nisa' 4:43, the qira'at variation provides one of the clearest demonstrations that differences in recitation may lead directly to divergent legal consequences in ritual law. As already shown in the draft, the variation between *lamastum* and *lāmastum* produces different semantic possibilities, including ordinary physical touch, reciprocal bodily contact, kissing, and sexual intercourse. Al-Rāzī is particularly important here because he explains that the basic meaning of *al-lams* is touch by hand, while the form built on the pattern of *mufā'alah* may indicate reciprocal contact rather than automatically referring to *jimā'* (Rāzī, 1981, p. 115). Al-Qurṭubī further shows that these two readings generated multiple juridical interpretations among exegetes and jurists, especially regarding whether contact with women should be understood as intercourse alone or also as ordinary touch in the context of ritual purity (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, pp. 223–224).

At the level of legal-interpretive consequence, this variation means that the verse does not yield a single ritual ruling. Rather, qira'at differences produce different legal positions concerning whether contact with women invalidates wudu, whether the verse refers only to sexual intercourse, or whether ordinary bodily touch may also be included, and how tayammum is consequently situated in cases of impurity. In this respect, Q. al-Nisa' 4:43 shows in a concrete way that qira'at variation is not merely a linguistic detail, but a textual factor with real normative implications in tafsir and fiqh, especially in matters related to the female body and ritual practice.

the verses analyzed in this section show that qira'at variation functions as a basis for plural legal-interpretive possibilities rather than as a mere linguistic supplement to the text. First, qira'at may tighten legal conditions, as seen in Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, where the discourse on polygamy moves beyond an abstract claim of justice toward a more demanding requirement of ethical responsibility and non-oppression. Second, qira'at may broaden the scope of prohibition, as shown in Q. al-Nisa' 4:19, where the verse no longer addresses only forced inheritance, but also extends to abusive retention, deprivation, hatred, and other forms of violence against women. Third, qira'at may generate divergent normative rulings, as in Q. al-Nisa' 4:43, where different readings shape different ritual-legal positions concerning bodily contact, wudu, and tayammum, while even the more limited variation in Q. al-Nisa' 4:34 demonstrates that qira'at can reorient the normative understanding of household leadership and moral agency. For this reason, qira'at differences do not simply diversify readings; they shape the legal and interpretive horizons through which gender verses are understood. In other words, the plurality of qira'at also means the plurality of legal-interpretive possibilities, and this constitutes the central finding of this second sub-section.

Re-reading Gender Verses Beyond Monolithic Hafṣ-Based Interpretation

The findings presented in the previous sections suggest that qira'at variation in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa' operates on two interconnected levels. First, as shown in the analysis of Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, 4:19, 4:34, and 4:43, different recitations generate semantic expansion by moving the verses beyond a single and fixed lexical meaning toward broader relational and ethical possibilities. Second, this semantic expansion is not merely linguistic, since it also produces legal-interpretive consequences that affect how the verses are normatively understood, whether by tightening legal conditions, broadening the scope of prohibition, or generating different juridical outcomes. Taken together, these findings make a strictly singular reading of gender verses increasingly problematic, because they show that the broader qira'at tradition preserves multiple interpretive horizons that cannot be adequately captured through one dominant recitational framework alone.

The dominance of Ḥafṣ 'an 'Āṣim in contemporary Muslim recitational practice is a historical and institutional fact, but it should not be mistaken for the exhaustion of the Qur'an's interpretive possibilities. Recent studies note that Ḥafṣ and Warsh remain the two most visible recitational traditions in contemporary Muslim societies, yet Ḥafṣ has achieved far wider circulation across the Muslim world. This predominance has been reinforced not only by recitational preference, but also by twentieth-century print standardization, especially the broad influence of the 1924 Cairo Qur'an and later institutional publication regimes, as well as by educational systems that normalized Ḥafṣ as the default pedagogical form of recitation (Mohd A'Tarahim et al., 2017). In this sense, the present predominance of Ḥafṣ is not merely a neutral textual fact, but also the product of historical processes of standardization, dissemination, and curricular selection.

For that reason, the hermeneutic issue is not that Ḥafṣ-based interpretation is invalid, since Ḥafṣ remains one of the canonical and fully legitimate qirā'āt, but that its practical dominance can encourage the monopolization of the interpretive horizon. Recent scholarship has shown that the widespread use of Ḥafṣ is closely tied to curricular alignment, print regimes, institutional transmission networks, and even modern technological standardization, while other recitations such as Warsh and Qālūn often persist as regional, specialized, or advanced forms of study rather than mainstream interpretive horizons (Kharisma & Muhammad Fathur Rozaq, 2026; Zakiyana Afazani Al Maula, Iffah Muzammil, & Muhammad Habibulloh, 2025). Once this distinction is recognized, it becomes possible to argue more

carefully that a monolithic Ḥafṣ-centered reading of gender verses risks flattening semantic and legal-interpretive possibilities already preserved within the wider qirā'āt tradition.

The four verses analyzed in this study show that the problem of monolithic interpretation is not merely theoretical, but becomes visible in concrete textual cases. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, qirā'at variation shifts the discourse on polygamy from a relatively abstract requirement of justice toward a more restrictive ethical demand that includes the avoidance of neglect and harm. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:19, the prohibition expands from forced inheritance alone into a broader protection against coercion, abusive retention, deprivation, and violence against women. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:34, the verse no longer appears closed within an absolute model of domestic hierarchy, since the textual nuance allows a reading that gives greater weight to reciprocal moral responsibility and female ethical agency. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:43, bodily contact and ritual purity are likewise shown to be non-singular, as qirā'at variation opens divergent legal and interpretive possibilities concerning touch, intercourse, wudu, and tayammum. In this light, the preceding analysis suggests that a monolithic Ḥafṣ-based reading tends to flatten precisely those semantic and legal-interpretive possibilities that become visible when the broader qirā'āt tradition is taken seriously. This makes the critique of monolithic reading empirically grounded in the very verses examined in this study.

This study does not emerge in a scholarly vacuum. Prior research has already argued that qirā'āt theory is important for reading gender-related verses more adequately. Ahmad Muttaqin, for example, explicitly argues that variant readings help interpreters approach gender verses thematically and contextually, and he uses Q. al-Nisā' 4:19 to show that qirā'āt can reposition women more respectfully within the interpretive frame (Muttaqin, 2016). In parallel, other recent studies have emphasized that qirā'āt differences are not merely phonetic or technical matters, but can affect tafsīr, legal interpretation, and the practical application of Islamic teachings (Ghozi Febra, Admizal, & Suriyadi, 2024). Studies on Ḥafṣ and Warsh, as well as more recent work on legal verses, show that recitational differences can shape fiqh debates and alter how legal or doctrinal implications are derived from the Qur'anic text (Mohd A'Tarahim et al., 2017). In that sense, the present article confirms an existing line of scholarship, but extends it by concentrating specifically on gender-related verses in Sūrat al-Nisā' and by showing how semantic expansion and legal-interpretive consequences work together in a single analytical framework.

At the same time, the findings of this article also speak to the broader literature on gendered Qur'anic interpretation. Karen Bauer's work has shown that many Qur'anic verses on marriage, testimony, and human creation were historically interpreted within increasingly elaborate male-dominated legal and exegetical hierarchies, even though those hierarchies were shaped by changing social and intellectual contexts rather than by a single immutable interpretive logic (Bauer, 2015). Read against that background, the present study offers a more specific internal corrective: instead of challenging hierarchical readings only through modern ethical critique, it shows that the wider qirā'āt tradition itself already preserves semantic and legal possibilities that can unsettle monolithic readings of gender verses. The novelty of this article, therefore, lies not in rejecting the tafsīr tradition from outside, but in reopening gender interpretation from within the textual plurality already authorized in the qirā'āt tradition.

These findings imply that the central problem lies not in the Qur'anic text itself, but in the narrowing of the interpretive horizon through which gender-related verses are read. In light of this, studies of gender in Qur'anic exegesis should treat qira'at plurality not as a peripheral technical issue, but as a methodological resource for reopening semantic, legal, and ethical possibilities already preserved within the Islamic textual tradition. This point is consistent with prior scholarship showing that qira'at theory is important for reading gender-related verses more contextually (Muttaqin, 2016), that qira'at variants affect meaning production and exegesis (Ummah et al., 2024), and that recitational differences can shape the interpretation and application of Qur'anic verses more broadly (Ghozi Febra et al., 2024). At the same time, the history of gender interpretation in the Qur'an has often developed within male-dominated hierarchical frameworks, so the present study may be positioned as an internal corrective grounded in the qira'at tradition itself rather than merely in modern ethical critique (Bauer, 2015). A non-monolithic reading of gender verses is therefore more dialogical, more contextual, and more faithful to the internal plurality of the Islamic interpretive tradition, precisely because it works from possibilities already authorized within qira'at itself.

Conclusion

This study concludes that qira'at variation in selected gender-related verses of Surat al-Nisa' is not merely a matter of phonetic diversity, but a textual factor that significantly shapes semantic, legal, and interpretive possibilities. The analysis of Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, 4:19, 4:34, and 4:43 demonstrates that variant readings expand the meaning of the verses beyond a single lexical

horizon and, at the same time, generate different legal-interpretive consequences in tafsir and istinbāt. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:3, qira'at variation makes the discourse on polygamy more restrictive by moving beyond abstract justice toward a stronger demand for non-oppression and ethical responsibility. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:19, the prohibition expands from forced inheritance to a broader protection against coercion, abusive retention, deprivation, and violence against women. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:34, even a subtle grammatical variation opens the possibility of reading household relations not only in hierarchical terms, but also in terms of reciprocal moral responsibility. In Q. al-Nisa' 4:43, qira'at differences produce divergent ritual-legal implications concerning bodily contact, wudu, and tayammum. Taken together, these findings show that the plurality of qira'at also entails the plurality of semantic and legal-interpretive horizons.

The main scholarly contribution of this article lies in showing that the re-reading of gender verses does not have to rely solely on external ethical critique, because the qira'at tradition itself already preserves internal textual plurality that can challenge monolithic interpretations. In this sense, the problem does not lie in the Qur'anic text, but in the narrowing of the interpretive horizon through a dominant single-reading framework, particularly when Hafs-based recitation is treated as if it exhausts the meaning of the text. This study therefore argues that gender-sensitive Qur'anic interpretation should treat qira'at plurality as a methodological resource rather than a peripheral technical issue. At the same time, this article is limited to selected verses in Surat al-Nisa' and to a textual-exegetical analysis of their semantic and legal implications. Further research may expand this inquiry by examining gender-related verses in other surahs, comparing a wider range of canonical qira'at, and exploring how qira'at plurality is negotiated in contemporary tafsir, legal discourse, and lived Muslim interpretive practice

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