



Book Review

Nasaruddin Umar

**Argumen Kesetaraan Jender Perspektif Al-Qur'an
(Indonesia: Paramadina 1999)**

Revisiting Gender Equality in the Qur'an: A Contextual Reading of Nasaruddin Umar's Thought

Nur Rofiah (PTIQ University of Jakarta)

The book *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender Perspektif Al-Qur'an* by Nasaruddin Umar stands as one of the most influential works in contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia, particularly in the field of Qur'anic exegesis from a gender equality perspective. Originating from the author's doctoral dissertation in Qur'anic studies, this work not only offers a rigorous academic analysis but also proposes a new intellectual framework capable of bridging sacred texts with modern social dynamics. In the context of growing global awareness of gender justice, this book remains highly relevant and continues to serve as a key reference for interpreting the Qur'an in a manner that is just, contextual, and humanistic.

One of the book's central strengths lies in its success in conceptually situating the issue of gender within an Islamic framework. Nasaruddin Umar begins by explaining that although the term "gender" emerged in Western discourse, the underlying awareness of distinctions between men and women is not entirely foreign to the Arabic-Islamic tradition. This is evident in linguistic categories such as *mudzakkar* (masculine) and *mu'annats* (feminine) in Arabic grammar, which reflect an early recognition of difference. However, the author draws a critical distinction between awareness of difference and awareness of justice. Gender awareness does not merely acknowledge that men and women are treated differently in society; it also entails a normative demand that such differences must not result in injustice.

At this point, the book makes a significant contribution by clearly distinguishing between *sex* (biological difference) and *gender* (social construction). Sex is understood as a biological distinction that is natural, universal, and immutable. It encompasses anatomical, physiological, and reproductive characteristics inherent in men and women. As a divine determination, biological difference does not contain injustice. In contrast, gender is defined as a social and cultural construct shaped by human societies. It includes roles, behaviors, and expectations assigned to men and women within specific cultural contexts. Because it is socially constructed, gender is dynamic, contextual, and subject to change. Consequently, injustice arises not from biological differences, but from unjust gender constructions.

This distinction serves as a crucial foundation for understanding how the Qur'an addresses relations between men and women. Nasaruddin Umar emphasizes that the Qur'an, as divine revelation, cannot be the source of injustice. However, injustice may arise within *tafsir* (interpretation), which is a human endeavor. Hence, it is essential to distinguish between the Qur'an itself and its interpretations. Although this distinction is theoretically clear, in practice the two are often conflated, leading to the misconception that criticism of interpretation is equivalent to criticism of the Qur'an. This book seeks to correct that misunderstanding by asserting that *tafsir* is a historical product shaped by social, cultural, and intellectual contexts.

Furthermore, the author explores the relationship between the Qur'an and social change. He demonstrates that the Qur'an did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather within the specific socio-cultural context of Arab society, including its gender relations. Many Qur'anic verses are thus closely tied to the realities of that time. For example, verses on inheritance and testimony are often interpreted literally without considering their historical context. In pre-Islamic Arab society, women were highly marginalized and were often denied inheritance altogether. Therefore, granting women a share of inheritance—even if only half that of men—represented a significant step toward justice in that historical context.

From this perspective, the book raises an important question: how should verses revealed in a particular social context be understood in societies that have undergone significant transformation? Should such verses be applied literally across all times and places, or should they be interpreted contextually in light of their underlying objectives? This question leads to a classical debate in Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) concerning the generality of the wording (*'umum al-lafz*) versus the specificity of the cause (*khusus al-sabab*). Nasaruddin Umar tends to favor an approach that prioritizes the context of revelation, especially for socially oriented verses. This approach allows for flexibility in interpretation while preserving the core principles of Islamic teachings.

Methodologically, the book suggests a gender-sensitive approach to Qur'anic interpretation through several key principles. First is the distinction between essential verses and supporting verses. Essential verses contain universal values such as justice, equality, and public welfare. These values are timeless and non-negotiable. Supporting verses, on the other hand, relate to the practical implementation of these values within specific social contexts. These verses are contextual and open to reinterpretation in response to changing circumstances. This distinction provides a structured framework for a more dynamic and relevant understanding of the Qur'an.

Second, the book highlights the importance of understanding the terminology used in the Qur'an to refer to men and women. Nasaruddin Umar points out that the Qur'an employs different terms to distinguish between biological and social aspects. Terms such as *adz-dzakar* and *al-untsa* refer to biological sex, while terms such as *ar-*

rijal and *an-nisa'* relate more to social constructs. This linguistic nuance has significant implications for interpretation, as verses employing socially constructed terms require a more contextual reading compared to those dealing with biological realities.

Third, the direction of interpretation must always align with the primary mission of the Qur'an: to establish justice and eliminate all forms of oppression. Nasaruddin Umar firmly states that any interpretation resulting in injustice must be reconsidered. This principle serves as an ethical foundation for gender-equitable tafsir. Interpretation is thus not merely an intellectual exercise, but also a moral responsibility aimed at fostering a more just society.

The book also offers a compelling analysis of how the Qur'an positions men and women as fundamentally equal, both biologically and socially. In terms of origin, the Qur'an affirms that both men and women are created from the same essence. In terms of spirituality, both possess equal potential to attain piety. In terms of social responsibility, both are entrusted with the role of *khalifah* (vicegerent) on earth. These findings demonstrate that gender equality is not a foreign concept in Islam, but rather an integral part of Qur'anic teachings.

Nevertheless, Nasaruddin Umar does not overlook the tensions that may arise between textual interpretations and contemporary realities. In modern societies, rapid social changes often create dilemmas in interpreting Qur'anic verses related to gender. On the one hand, there is a tendency to maintain literal interpretations as a form of fidelity to the text. On the other hand, there is a need to align these interpretations with evolving notions of justice. The book offers a balanced approach by emphasizing the importance of understanding the objectives (*maqasid*) of the text rather than adhering rigidly to its literal form.

Overall, this work convincingly demonstrates that gender issues in Islam are not rooted in the Qur'an itself, but in its interpretation. Many instances of perceived injustice stem from readings that are insufficiently sensitive to context and purpose. Therefore, a more critical, contextual, and justice-oriented approach to tafsir is necessary.

As an academic work, the book is distinguished by its systematic argumentation and extensive use of references. At the same time, its language remains accessible, allowing it to reach a broader audience beyond academia. This makes it valuable not only for scholars, but also for practitioners, activists, and anyone concerned with gender justice in Islam.

Ultimately, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender Perspektif Al-Qur'an* is not merely a book about gender; it is a call to rethink how religion is understood and practiced. It invites readers to move beyond the surface of the text and engage with its deeper meanings by considering both context and purpose. In an ever-changing world, such an approach is essential for ensuring that religious teachings remain relevant and capable of addressing contemporary human challenges.

In conclusion, this book represents a significant contribution to the development of a more inclusive, just, and contextual interpretation of the Qur'an. It not only critiques gender-biased interpretations, but also offers a methodological alternative that can be further developed. In the context of Indonesia's diverse and dynamic society, such ideas are crucial for fostering a more egalitarian and harmonious social order, in which both men and women are recognized as full and equal participants in religious, social, and human life.