

RIGHTEOUS WOMEN AND SUBMISSION: Between Islamic Texts and Muslim Women's Perspectives

*Farah Nuril Izza, * Jamilah, ** & Zaimatus Sa'diyah****

*Universitas Islam Negeri Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto,
Indonesia

**Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

***Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Email: farahizza@uinsaizu.ac.id

Abstract

This article explores the contested concepts of righteous women and submission in Islamic literature, and how Muslim women perceive, interpret, and embody these ideals in daily life. Combining textual analysis with field research, this study investigates women's agency within Islamic frameworks, particularly how religious texts are internalized, contested, or reinterpreted. Primary sources include classical and contemporary tafsir and hadith literature, alongside key works on gender and women's agency in Islam. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Muslim women from diverse educational and socio-cultural backgrounds to capture a range of lived experiences. The findings reveal that classical to modern exegetes predominantly associate women's righteousness with obedience, primarily to God and to husbands, especially in the marriage context. In contrast, contemporary scholarship increasingly frames righteousness as a personal moral and ethical responsibility beyond marital obedience. The interviews reflect this interpretive variation: while some Muslim women uphold traditional views, others prioritize intellectual autonomy, spiritual depth, and egalitarian relationships in the household. The study also identifies varied expressions of women's agency, including devotional commitment, subtle resistance, and strategic engagement with religious

norms. Amid ongoing debates over gender roles in Islam, this article underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how Muslim women actively negotiate religious texts within evolving socio-cultural contexts. It contributes to broader discourses on Islamic feminism, gender justice, and interpretive authority. It also offers fresh insights into the dynamic interface between scripture, tradition, and lived female piety.

Keywords: islamic text; righteous women; submission; women's agency

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Introduction

Discussions about righteous women in Islam are often associated with submission. This is due to gender-biased interpretations of *qiwamah* as referenced in Q.S. an-Nisâ' [4]:34. Traditional and modern interpretations explain *qiwamah* as the husband's dominance over his wife. Al-Ṭabarî in his book *Jâmi' al-Bayân fi Ta'wîl âyi al-Qurân*, one of the most important classical tafsir, expresses the significance of the verse by asserting that men are entrusted with the responsibility over women, describing them as *ahl al-qiyâm 'alâ nisâ'ihim* (meaning: those who are in charge of their women) (al-Ṭabarî 2001, 6:68). Al-Qurṭubî in *al-Jâmi' li Ahkâm al-Qurân* has similar view, that *qiwamah* implies that men, with their rational and organizational capacities, hold authority over women (al-Qurṭubî 1964, 5:169).

Modern books of tafsir resonate with this opinion. Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida in *Tafsir al-Manâr* define righteous women as submissiveness, which means obedience to God and their husbands. These patriarchal definitions have also impacted the interpretative framework of contemporary Indonesian scholars. Musthofa, in *Al-Ibriiz*, articulates that men possess dominion over women due to their supremacy in terms of intellect, rationale, and influence (Musthofa 1960, 84). In addition, some hadith sources reinforce this argument. For instance, *Sunan an-Nasâi* explains that a righteous woman is one who obeys her husband (al-Nasâi 2018, 129).

Fairclough (1992, 169) states that text functions in constructing social reality. The gender-biased interpretations of *qiwamah* affect Muslims' way of thinking about husband-wife relations. Current studies, such as Halim (2011), Rinaldo (2019), Susanto (2019), Resviana (2021),

Soleha and Miski (2022), Atmi (2023), and Padrian (2023), emphasize husbands' authority over their wives. Their studies affirm that "good women" is often defined as those who obey their God and husbands. Rinaldo's study of married couples in Indonesia explains how Islamic scripts construct marriage perceptions, where wives' obedience and husbands' authority within the family are considered as ideal in religion. Additionally, women may expand their careers outside the home, yet their foremost responsibility remains domestic (Rinaldo 2019).

Nevertheless, Mir-Hosseini contends that the resistance to the traditional perspective of male dominance and the notion of gender equality within Islam has transformed in response to contemporary society. Many scholars call for change within the Muslim community attempted to harmonize Islamic principles and morality with progressive ideologies regarding justice and gender relations (Mir-Hosseini 2015, 42). Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd are among the scholars who have significant influence on Muslim family law reforms. They have criticized the tendency of patriarchal norms in the interpretation of religious texts and emphasized the need to comprehend these texts with the contexts, particularly those addressing the dynamics between genders within the household. Similarly, Rinaldo argues that the traditional concept of righteous women and submission in household relations is increasingly challenged. This is driven by expanded access to education and opportunity for women, as well as competing gender discourses in Islam (Rinaldo 2019).

Studies on righteous women and submission have been conducted to understand various perspectives of these concepts within household. Many studies also discussed the interpretation of Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions on the topic. For example, Atmi (2023) reviewed Quranic verses on good women and gender equality in Shahrur's hermeneutics; Solehah (2022) compared Ibn Kathir and Amina Wadud's perspectives on good women mentioned in both Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:1 and Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34; Resviana (2021) explored the concept of good women in *Tafsir al-Azhar*; and Haitomi (2021) reinterpreted hadiths about wife's obedience to husband in the perspective of *mubâdalah*.

The way Muslim women define and embody the idea of righteousness in daily life is related to the concept of agency. Generally, agency is understood as a person's capacity to choose and act. Feminist scholars and post-structuralists tend to define agency as resistance to

domination (Aggarwal, 2004; Akbulut, 2015). These scholars view that women who choose to comply with Islamic rules, for example, and do not resist male's domination lack agential capacity. In contrast, other scholars state that resistance is not the only form of women's agency because it can also be seen in women's voluntary acts of submission (Mahmood 2005; Avishai 2008; Burke 2012).

Recent studies have discussed female agency from various perspectives—for instance, the concept itself (Cavazzoni & Veronesse 2022; Wiesner-Hanks 2023; Rosa 2023) and how women in different contexts exercise agency (Agustin & Putri 2019; Friedrich et.al. 2021; Ammari et.al. 2022; Iwinska & Bukowska 2022; Ansor 2023; Chaoui 2023; Izza 2023; Jamilah 2023; Memon 2025).

Limited scholarly works gave attention to how Islamic texts and Muslim women themselves define the concepts righteous women and submission. Thus, this study aims to address this significant gap. Specifically, the current study explores the diverse ways Muslim women interpret and practice agency in relation to these concepts. The analysis investigates whether righteousness is tied inherently to submission and whether righteous women must always be identified by their obedience to their husbands. It also traces how Quranic exegetes across different historical periods have interpreted the righteous women concept, specifically in marital relationship. In addition, this study presents the various perspectives of Muslim women from diverse backgrounds, considering how their comprehension has been shaped by both classical exegesis and their experiences. Lastly, it discusses how the shifts in social realities within Muslim communities have affected the discourses and what implications these evolving understandings hold for contemporary Muslim life.

Research Method

This study examines the concept of righteous women and submission as presented in Islamic texts and how Muslim women interpreted these ideas. To provide an in-depth understanding, it employs a qualitative research design. Various sources are used to gather interpretations related to righteous women and submission. The primary sources include Islamic texts, particularly Quranic exegesis from different periods: classical works such as *Jâmi' al-Bayân fî Ta'wîl Âyi al-Qurân* by al-Ṭabarî; medieval works such as *al-Jâmi' li Ahkâm al-Qurân* by al-Qurṭubî;

modern interpretations like *al-Manâr* by Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida; and contemporary works such as *Tafsir al-Misbah* by Quraish Shihab.

Other references include interpretive works relevant to the topic, like *Dawâir al-Khawf Qirâat fî Khitâb al-Mar'ah* by Abu Zayd, *Al-Kitâb wa al-Qurân: Qirâah Mu'âshirah* by Shahrur, and *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* by Amina Wadud. This study also uses hadith collections such as *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, and *Sunan An-Nasâi*, as well as commentaries like *Fath al-Bârî Bisharh Shahîh al-Bukhârî*. Literature on women's agency give additional context for analyzing the concept and its various forms.

This study also incorporates semi-structured interviews with ten Muslim women from diverse educational and social backgrounds, all of whom actively engage in the Quran, tafsir, and hadith studies. Four participants (Mrs. Nia, Mrs. Yayah, Mrs. Dewi, and Mrs. Umu) are married, working mothers, and are active in organization. Mrs. Nia is a Quran-Hadith lecturer and a member of Muslimat NU and KUPI. Mrs. Yayah, a pharmacist, joins study groups organized by PKS or Salimah. Mrs. Dewi lectures in tafsir and is involved in gender-related programs. Mrs. Umu, a *nyai* and JP3M activist, is well-versed in tafsir and hadith.

Three informants (Mrs. Sari, Mrs. Nurma, and Mrs. Lita) are housewives. The first two are graduates of *pesantren* and have experienced marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Mrs. Sari completed primary school, while Mrs. Nurma holds a bachelor's degree from an Islamic university. Mrs. Lita is both a housewife and a university student. The remaining three informants (Zia, Queena, and Tasya) are unmarried university students. Zia previously studied at an Islamic university in Africa before continuing her education in Indonesia, while Queena and Tasya are enrolled in a Quran and Tafsir program. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, triangulation and participant validation were applied.

Results and Discussion

Righteous Women and Submission in Islamic Texts

The term submission is often related to the Arabic word *tâ'a* which means willingly obeying a command (al-Jurjani 1984, 181). Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani defines submission as doing what is commanded and avoiding what is forbidden (al-Asqalani 1390: 112). Ibn Atiyyah states that *tâ'a*

reflects the consistency of a current command from an authority with the intended purpose behind the command (Atiyyah 2001, 4: 352). Additionally, the term also related to the Arabic words *qanata* or *qutût* which indicate steadfast obedience without deviation (Abbad 1991, 5:346). Al-Dahhak stated that every word *qanata* or *qutût* in the Quran refers to obedience, an opinion that is also approved by Abu Sa'id al-Khudry (Al-Zabidi 1969, 5:45).

In describing righteous women, several Quranic verses discuss submission, such as in Q.S. An-Nisa' [4]:34 and Q.S. al-Tahrim [66]:5 and 12, using the terms "*qânitât*" and "*qânitîn*" derived from "*qanata*" or "*qutût*". Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 centers on marital context, specifically between husbands and wives. The phrase "...*fa aṣṣâliḥâtu qânitâtun*..." in this verse leads many exegetes (Quran interpreters) to say that one of the traits of righteous women is submission to their husbands. Al-Ṭabarî, for instance, argued that "*qânitât*" here means being obedient women both to Allah and their husbands (al-Ṭabarî 2001, 6:691). However, in his interpretation on Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:5, which describes the Prophet Muhammad's domestic life and the ideal traits of his wives, al-Ṭabarî elaborated "*qânitât*" as women's obedience to God, not even mentioning submission to husbands. Meanwhile, in the commentary on Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:12, describing Maryam's piety, al-Ṭabarî used "*qânitîn*" to accentuate Maryam's devotion to God.

Alongside al-Ṭabarî, Ibn Kathir also argued that the characteristics of righteous women is being "*qânitât*", indicating their obedience to their husbands in matters that are proper and good (Kathir 1998, 2:257). Similarly, al-Qurṭubî, in his commentary on Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34, interpreted the word "*qânitât*" as God's command for women to obey their husbands and fulfill their responsibilities, particularly concerning property and demeanor during the husbands' absence. Al-Ṭabarî, Ibn Kathir, and al-Qurṭubî based their notion on a hadith narrated by Abu Hurairah,

"The best woman is the one who makes you happy when you look at her. When you command her, she obeys you, and when you are absent, she protects herself and your property. Then, the Prophet recited this verse (verse 34 of Surah an-Nisa)" (al-Qurṭubî 1964, 5:170; Kathir 1998, 2:257; al-Ṭabarî 2001, 6:693).

Nevertheless, similar to al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī did not explicitly mention women's obedience to their husbands in his exegesis on Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:5 and 12 (al-Qurṭubī 1964, 18:193).

Another exegete, al-Zamakhsharī said that Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 indicates the authority of men over women because of Allah's preference for some over others. In explaining the word "*qānitāt*," he referred to women who devoutly obey both God and husbands in matters of goodness and protect marital harmony. He grounded his opinion on the aforementioned hadith (al-Zamakhsharī 1998, 2:68).

In a modern work *Tafsir al-Manār*, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida divided women into two main categories: righteous and unrighteous. As stated by them based on Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34, righteous women are indicated by submissiveness, meaning obedience to God and their husbands by preserving the husbands' rights in their absence. They further explained that this obedience is done as the reward of the dowry given to the wives and the husbands' obligation to provide maintenance (Rida 1910, 5:67-68). A similar interpretation is proposed by al-Zuhailī, a contemporary exegete, stressing that righteous women's main trait is their submission to their husbands so long as their obedience does not violate God's law (al-Zuhailī 1991, 5:55). However, like al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī, his interpretation of the other verses (Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:5 and 12) does not explicitly mention the word "*qānitāt*" as wives' submission to their husbands (al-Zuhailī 1991, 28:304).

Hamka, a prominent Indonesian exegete, explained that "*qānitāt*" in Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 implies a woman's submission to both Allah and her husband. He said that men are regarded as the leaders in the household, thus, women are obligated to obey not only God, but also their husbands. This submission, in his opinion, relates to woman's roles as wife and mother (Hamka 1983, 2:1195-1197). In his interpretation on other verses, Hamka underlined that righteous women are those who abide by God's commands, evading negligence and laziness, and who comply with their husbands' directives (Hamka 1983, 10:7505).

Another Indonesian scholar, Quraish Shihab, interpreted Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 by explaining that women are not obliged to supply food, sew clothes, and so on. It is rather the husband's obligation to prepare food and ready-made clothes for his wife. Shihab further stated that this obligation grants the husband the right to be obeyed in matters that do not conflict with religious rules and the wife's personal rights. A righteous

woman, according to him, is one who is obedient to God and also her husband as reflected in the word “*qânitât*” (Shihab 2000, 2:402-408).

The notion that one of the traits of a righteous woman is submission to her husband is not only found in classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary tafsir, but also in hadith literature. Recent studies often affirm this idea, indicating a righteous woman as obedient to God and husband. For example, al-Shammari and Mohammed (2023) concluded that sharia and legal framework outline the principle that a wife must submit to her husband. When the wife disobeys, the husband is given the right to discipline her. Similarly, Susanto (2019) also described obedience to God and to one’s husband as the key qualifications of a righteous woman. A study conducted by Soleha and Miski on Yuvid TV YouTube channel shows that righteous women were characterized by obedience to God and their husbands, as well as staying at home doing domestic works. Therefore, this perspective considers career women as unrighteous and seen as deviating from Islamic teachings (Soleha & Miski 2022).

However, other contemporary interpretations and recent studies bring forward fresh perspectives on submission concept and the male-female relationship. In discussing Q.S. an-Nisa’ [4]:34, Shahrur asserted that women can hold the role of leaders within the family and gain the *qawwâmiyah* status when they support the household and contribute financially. Meanwhile, men also hold leader’s roles in things requiring physical strength. Islamic philosophy, represented by al-Fârâbî (870-950), and Sufism, expressed by Ibn Arâbî (1165-1240), placed women in an equal position with men (Soleh et al. 2023). Here, women and men have the same opportunity, status, and rights to be leaders within the family.

Syahrur nonetheless stated that only righteous women can hold the status of leader. He further defined “*qânitât*” not as submission, but as calmness and consistency. Another key qualification is *ḥâfidhât* which means keeping the private matters of one’s husband and household as commanded by Allah. A righteous woman should refrain from disclosing the private matters publicly, and the same obligation applies to the husband. Syahrur also interpreted the word “*qanata*” or “*qutût*” and their derivatives as referring to tranquility, steadfastness, and consistency in practice. Accordingly, he argued that the definition of a righteous woman should not be limited to submissiveness toward her husband, but rather comprehended as being responsible, self-sufficient individual in her own right (Syahrur 1990, 619-621).

Amina Wadud contended that the terms “*qânitât*” and “*qânitîn*” in the Q.S. an-Nisa’ [4]:34 and Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:5 and 12 are often misinterpreted as women’s obedience to their husbands as the quality of good women. She adds that in other verses, these terms are used for both women and men, describing believers who submit themselves to Allah only, rather than to fellow creatures. While many scholars, as mentioned previously, elaborated this as wife’s obligation to obey her husband, Wadud argues that this interpretation is conflicting with the text as a whole (Wadud 1999, 74-77).

She points out that since the Quran uses the term *nushuz* (disobedience) for both men and women, it is inaccurate to only interpret the term in Q.S. an-Nisa’ [4]:34 as wives’ disobedience. Sayyid Quthb as mentioned by Wadud argued that the verse provides alternative solution to face a dispute in marital context. At the end of the verse, God states that if women obey, men should not mistreat them. The emphasis here is on men’s proper treatment to women, rather than commanding obedience. Wadud claimed that the Quran neither commands a woman to obey her husband nor implies that submission is a key trait of a righteous woman (Wadud 1999, 74-77).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is another scholar who approach Islamic texts with a critical methodology. He condemned traditional interpretations that obligate absolute obedience of a woman to her husband, arguing that the Quran promotes justice for all human beings, regardless of gender. Q.S. an-Nisa’ [4]:34, in his perspective, reflects social structure rather than endorsing for gender hierarchy. He then proposed the idea that marital relationship should be based on mutual cooperation and respect, rather than one, typically the wife, who religiously submit herself to another. Abu Zayd also challenged the assumption that submission is a religious duty for women and calls for gender equality (Zayd 2004, 295).

Table 1 summarizes arguments from various exegetes on the terms “*qânitât*” and “*qânitîn*” in the Q.S. an-Nisa’ [4]:34 and Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:5 and 12, as well as their views on the righteous women and submission. The table shows noticeable shift in how these concepts are comprehended. Earlier interpretations of the Quranic verses frequently emphasized that righteous women are those who submit to God and their husbands, placing women in a subordinate position, reinforcing a hierarchical framework. This perspective sees obedience to the husbands as an ideal form of women’s righteousness. On the contrary, contemporary

interpretations move away from the hierarchical model. It instead emphasizes moral integrity and spirituality, regardless of gender.

Table 1
Exegetical Views on “*Qânitât*,” “*Qânitîn*,” Righteous Women,
and Submission

Quranic Exegetes	The Meaning of <i>Qânitât</i> & <i>Qânitîn</i>		View of Righteous Women & Submission
	Q.S. An-Nisa’ [4]: 34	Q.S. At-Tahrim [66]: 5 and 12	
al-Ṭabarî	Obedience to God and husband	Obedience to God	Women should submit to God and husbands
Ibn Kathir	Obedience to God and husband	Terms not discussed	Submission to God and husbands
al-Qurṭubî	Obedience to God and husband	Only obedience to God	Devotion to God and husband in matters of goodness for marital harmony
al-Zamakhsharî	Obedience to God and husband	Terms not discussed	Devotion to God and husband
Abduh & Rida	Obedience to God and husband	No interpretation	Submission to God and husband
al-Zuhaili	Obedience to God and husband	Only obedience to God	Submission to God and husband
Hamka	Obedience to God and husband	Obedience to God and husband	Righteousness involves religious duties and family roles
Shihab	Obedience to God and husband	Obedience to God and the Prophet	Obedience to God and husband
Shahrur	Calmness and consistency	Tranquility and responsibility	Righteousness is not submission to husband, but responsibility and self-reliance
Amina Wadud	Submission to God	Submission to God	Righteousness is rooted in piety and moral

			actions, not obedience to husband
Abu Zayd	Not addressed directly	Not addressed directly	Obedying husbands is not related to women's righteousness

The Concept of Women’s Agency

To analyze how Muslim women in this study comprehend the idea of righteous women and how it is reflected in their daily lives, this section explores the concept of women’s agency. Although the concept is still debatable among scholars, it is similarly defined as a person’s capacity to choose and act (Mahmood 2005). For the purpose of this study, the authors outline two different perspectives on women’s agency (resistant and submissive) developed by feminist scholars from multiple approaches e.g. religion and gender. The first perspective defines agency as an act of resistance. Feminists and post-structuralists develop this viewpoint and assume that women are generally oppressed by patriarchal social structures and desire liberation from such oppression (Akbulut 2015; Rinaldo 2019). This framework argues that women's agency manifests itself in the form of resistance to male dominance. When women are perceived to be men's subordinates, they use resistance as a survival strategy (Aggarwal 2004, 16-17). Hence, women are only considered agentive if they act against oppression.

Another point of view is offered by scholars such as Saba Mahmood who challenged the notion of agency as resistance and identified another form, which is submissive agency. Her concept significantly broadens the understanding of agency beyond the resistance and liberation framework (Mahmood 2005, 28-29). She argues that agency is context-dependent and can be reproduced outside the liberal framework or within the structure of power. As cited by Rinaldo (2014, 828), this perspective affirms that agency may also be expressed through devotion or conformity, depending on the framework in which it operates.

Mahmood argued that one’s submissive act should be considered an agency. Grounding her argument on her study of a women’s piety movement in Egypt (Mahmood 2005, 7), she found that women exercised their agency by submitting themselves to the norms of the public piety movement. These women attend religious lessons to cultivate their religion. They viewed the embodiment of modesty, shyness, and piety in

everyday lives as an expression of religiosity. Using Foucault's framework of the 'mode of subjectivation,' Mahmood concluded that these women's behavior she found in her study are not signs of subjugation, but rather conscious choice to align with religious norms (Mahmood 2005, 29-30). Hence, Mahmood maintains that agency is not universal, but is culturally specific. Women can choose freely to comply with particular religious norms that others might perceive as oppressive. In this sense, agency is not limited to acts of resistance but also multiple ways people inhabit norms (Mahmood 2005, 14-15).

Based on Mahmood's notion, scholars like Avishai (2008) and Burke (2012) expanded the framework of submissive agency. Avishai uses the term "observance" to describe women's agency within conservative religion settings through a study conducted from 2002 to 2005. In the same religious realm, Burke, a sociologist specializing in sexuality and religion, followed up Avishai's notion by coining the term "compliant agency" (Burke 2012, 122-123). Together, Mahmood, Avishai, and Burke, broaden the understanding by indicating that agency can also be seen in women's submissive acts, particularly when the subjects are willing to submit. Burke identifies four different forms of agency expressed by religious women, including Muslim: non-compliance or resistance, empowerment through faith in religion, instrumental use of religion for other advantages, and compliant or religious agency.

Muslim Women on Righteousness and Submission: Diverse Responses and Forms of Agency

This section contains the experiences and perspectives of ten Muslim women from diverse backgrounds. It is expected to explore their interpretation and embodiment on righteous women and submission particularly within the marriage context and family life. Each informant reflects on the meaning of righteousness and submission grounding on their understanding of Islamic teachings and personal experiences.

Most of them share similar perception on traditional interpretations of Quranic exegesis, which consider obedience to one's husband as a characteristic of righteous women. Mrs. Yayah agreed that a righteous (*salihah*) woman is one who remains obedient to Allah and constantly remembers Him. She emphasized that once married, a woman's leader is her husband, referring to Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 as her reasoning which she claimed as non-negotiable. However, she also affirmed that expressing an

opinion does not necessarily mean disobedience—it depends on the context. In religious matters, for example, refusing a husband's call to fulfil a religious duty would be considered disobedience (Yayah 2024).

Other informants (Mrs. Nia, Mrs. Dewi, Mrs. Umu, Mrs. Sari, Mrs. Nurma, Mrs. Lita, and Zia) also shared similar perspectives, although their experiences of submission varied. Mrs. Nia, for instance, expressed that a righteous woman should submit to her husband aligning with the principle of *mu'asharah bi al ma'rûf* (mutual respect and kindness). She highlighted that the implementation of submission, as mentioned in Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34, focuses on open communication. It does not mean that a wife cannot refuse her husband's request (Nia 2024).

Mrs. Dewi said that the characteristics of righteous women are *qânitât* and *hâfidzât li al-ghaibi bimâ hafidzallâh*, meaning they are obedient to Allah and submissive to their husbands. However, she argued that this submission is not due to male authority but rather as an expression of love (Dewi 2024). Similarly, Mrs. Umu defined a righteous woman as someone who is virtuous in both faith and social interaction (*mu'âmalah*). According to her, a *ṣālihah* woman is one who submits to Allah and one's husband, as written in Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34. However, the wife's submission to her husband is not considered as oppression but for the purpose of maintaining harmony in a marriage (Umu 2024).

Mrs. Sari, Mrs. Nurma, and Mrs. Lita emphasized that based on Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34, righteous women are those who submit to God and their husbands. Nevertheless, the husband should be righteous for the wife to obey. Mrs. Sari and Mrs. Nurma stated that they chose to submit to their recent husbands because they are responsible and protective (Sari 2025; Nurma 2025). Likewise, Mrs. Lita argued that a righteous woman should submit to a husband who is morally decent, responsible, and adheres to Islamic teachings (Lita 2025).

Zia provided a more balanced view as a university student who is still unmarried. She suggested that a righteous woman is someone who harmonizes intellectual and spiritual aspects. Though she agreed that a woman who is obedient to her husband is considered righteous as stated in Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34, this concept requires a reciprocal framework within the household so that righteousness is expected from both spouses (Zia 2025).

Other informants of this study leaned more toward contemporary interpretations, offering a broader understanding of righteous woman's

quality. Queena, for example, defined it as a woman of virtue—the one who speaks and behaves with kindness, thinks wisely, values learning, has empathy, and embodies religious and moral values in her life. For her, Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 does not really indicate a wife's submission to the husband (Queena 2025). Similarly, Tasya described a righteous woman as someone who firmly upholds religious teachings, avoiding what is forbidden and obeying what is commanded by God. In her opinion, Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 shows that spouses should guide and trust, respect, and listen attentively to each other in order to foster a harmonious marital relationship (Tasya 2025).

According to Wolfgang Iser, a literary text is shaped by the author's choices guiding the response of its readers. However, text also has numerous gaps which invite readers to engage their imagination in comprehending meaning. Iser added, meaning is not fixed in the text itself. Instead, it results from dynamic interactions between readers' engagement and their backgrounds, beliefs, as well as experiences (Iser 1974; Iser 1978). The various perspectives and responses of the informants in this study occur due to the "gaps" contained in the Quranic verses, such as Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34, and literary texts of tafsir which require readers to construct concepts, such as submission and righteous women. The dynamic interaction between the texts and the reader's different backgrounds as well as critical orientations resulted in their various forms of agency.

As previously discussed, many feminist scholars tend to explain agency in terms of resistance to patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, some recent scholars like Saba Mahmood challenges the narrow framing. She argues that agentival capacity is not confined to acts of resistance, but also includes multiple ways individuals inhabit and negotiate norms (Mahmood 2005, 15). The perspectives and experiences of the ten informants in this study prove that women's agency is grounded in diverse actions. Mrs. Nia, for instance, exhibits compliant and resistant forms of agency. Not only does she choose to submit to her husband, she also practices her autonomy in certain situations e.g. refusing her husband's order. She stated,

"My husband doesn't forbid me from leaving the house, but I always tell him and ask for his permission. Before taking part in any event or activity, even though my husband is not at home, I text him to ask. If he agrees, I will go; if not, I stay. Sometimes he wants me to finish all the household chores at once. When I refuse

to do it instantly, it triggers disputes. However, for me, I don't need to force myself to obey his command. The most important thing is whether I feel comfortable or not" (Nia 2024)

Mrs. Nia's narrative reflects a subtle form of agency. It navigates between obedience and self-determination, formed by her religious commitment and personal well-being.

The agency of Mrs. Yayah, Mrs. Sari, Mrs. Lita, Mrs. Nurma and Zia is grounded in observance. Mrs. Yayah said that in matters of worship, if a wife refuses her husband's request to fulfill her domestic duties, she can be considered disobedience (Yayah 2024). Meanwhile, Mrs. Sari emphasized that it would be a great loss if she failed to uphold her dignity and submit to a decent husband (Sari 2025). Similarly, Mrs. Lita expressed that her husband's good moral compels her to submit to him (Lita 2025).

Mrs. Dewi and Mrs. Umu also showed their agency through submission. However, their understanding of Islamic texts and daily practices indicate that their submission or their thought about a wife's submission is also a way to gain other advantages. Mrs. Umu said that she submits to her husband to maintain marital harmony (Umu 2024). Mrs. Dewi added that fulfilling her husband's needs is not submitting to male authority, but rather expressing *rahmah* (compassion) and love (Dewi 2024). In contrast, Queena and Tasya are more resistant toward traditional exegetical interpretations. Queena stressed that one should follow the other's guidance to maintain household harmony (Queena 2025), while Tasya affirmed that both husband and wife should obey one another in matters of good and just (Tasya 2025).

These narratives from women of diverse backgrounds reveal that women's agency is not restricted to autonomy or resistance against religious and patriarchal structures. Instead, these women make an effort to comply with their religious teachings in their daily lives in multiple ways. Their agency is expressed through a spectrum of practices, from observant submission to reciprocal partnership, each shaped by personal perspective and religious commitment.

Reframing Righteousness and Submission: Social and Academic Implications

Emerging interpretations of righteous women and submission have significant social implications, particularly within Muslim societies. First, these perspectives redefine righteousness as individual moral quality

affecting male-female relationship within a marital context. Submission is no longer viewed as a hierarchical obligation. Yet, it is perceived as a dialogical relationship in accordance with Islamic principles of justice. In family life, women are increasingly viewed as active partners—contributing to decision-making processes—and no longer as subjects of submission. This shift in perspective allows women to feel more empowered and freely voice their opinions.

Second, in public realm and broader community, women who embody personal piety are recognized as agents of change or influential figures. Righteousness is no longer associated with domestic roles, but is related to ethical conduct in both private and public spaces. This perspective gives women to engage and contribute in various fields of society. Third, the evolving interpretations also open pathways for Muslim women to actively participate in leadership and decision-making roles within public settings, including political spheres and governmental institutions. Women's righteousness is no longer seen through their submission to male authority or dominance but through their commitment to public welfare.

From an academic framework, the new interpretations influenced gender studies in Islam. Scholars, particularly those working in the field of the Quran and Tafsir, are increasingly employ various methodologies in interpreting Islamic texts, such as hermeneutics and contextual analysis, in addition to traditional approaches. These methods offer alternative insights regarding the concepts of women's righteousness and submission, challenging traditional conception. This shift not only enriches the academic discourse, but also encourages critical engagement with foundational texts based on contemporary realities.

In the field of sociology, cultural studies, and Living Quran studies which analyze how the Quran is lived, practiced, and interpreted in day-to-day life (Izza 2024), researchers can observe how women express piety across different spheres. Women's righteousness is not only examined within domestic settings, but also in public places. Furthermore, these developments prove that the meaning of sacred texts, particularly in Islam, is not fixed but continually negotiated through social practices. Some concepts such as embodied piety become relevant to understanding women's righteousness in public life, demonstrating that religious devotion and social engagement are not mutually exclusive but deeply intertwined.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the concept of righteous women and submission is diverse—they are far from uniform. Exegetes from different periods, including al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathir, al-Qurṭubī, al-Zamakhsharī, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, al-Zuhailī, Hamka, and Quraish Shihab, have generally associated women's righteousness with submission to God and their husbands, particularly within marital relationships. Their arguments are based on the textual meaning of Q.S. an-Nisa' [4]:34 and Q.S. at-Tahrim [66]:5 and 12. However, contemporary interpretations show a shift. Some scholars like Muhammad Syahrur, Amina Wadud, and Abu Zayd do not link women's righteousness with hierarchical submission. Instead, they view the concept through the lens of individual spirituality, integrity, and moral duty.

The narratives of the ten Muslim women in this study reflect a spectrum of interpretations. While many shared a similar view to the traditional interpretations of Quranic exegetes, which consider obedience to one's husband as a characteristic of righteous women, their lived experiences show a more nuanced understanding and implementation. Other informants aligned more closely with the contemporary interpretations which offer a broader understanding of the qualities of righteous women such as spirituality and moral values. All in all, the study affirms different expressions of women's agency as through the way they attempt to negotiate and interpret Islamic texts within their dynamic social environments. Through this engagement, they situate themselves as autonomous agents, actively shaping their religious identities in dynamic and evolving contexts.

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