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Gender Relations in Urban-Popular Qur'anic Exegesis: Repackaging Patriarchal Authority in Ahmad Sarwat's Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh

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Abstract

Purpose – Studies on gender in Indonesian Qur'anic exegesis have largely focused on progressive-hermeneutical interpretations, while fiqh-oriented tafsir circulating in urban digital spaces remains understudied. This study aims to examine the construction of gender relations in Ahmad Sarwat's Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh, particularly in his interpretation of Q.S. An-Nisa' verses 1, 11, and 34, and to identify its ideological position within contemporary Indonesian exegetical discourse.

Design/methods/approach – This research employs a qualitative library research design. Data were collected through systematic close reading of Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh and analyzed using content analysis and textual interpretation. The analysis focuses on three dimensions of gender relations: ontological (human creation), socio-economic (inheritance distribution), and structural (qawwamah and family leadership). **Findings** – The study identifies a paradigm of Traditionalist Complementary Hierarchy. Sarwat affirms ontological and spiritual equality between men and women but maintains asymmetrical socio-juridical authority structures. Classical patriarchal concepts are reformulated through modern urban-managerial language without altering their underlying epistemological foundations. While the interpretation promotes ethical moderation by restricting physical violence, it rejects substantive restructuring of domestic power relations and continues to privilege male leadership within the family. **Research implications/limitations** – The study is limited to textual analysis of three selected verses in a single exegetical work and does not investigate audience reception or the influence of digital dissemination on interpretation.

Originality/value – This research proposes the concept of Urban-Popular Exegesis, a typology characterized by innovation in medium and presentation while maintaining conservative legal substance. The findings demonstrate that digital religious platforms may reinforce refined forms of patriarchy rather than necessarily promoting liberalized interpretations of gender in Islam.

Keywords: Gender Relations, An Nisa, Ahmad Sarwat, Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh, Patriarchy.

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Introduction

Gender issues within Muslim societies remain a subject of ongoing debate, particularly regarding the interpretation of Quranic verses concerning the relationship between men and women. In this context, the interpretation of these verses represents a scholarly endeavor to elucidate the meanings inherent within the Quran [1]. One of the most frequently cited verses is Surah An-Nisa, verse 34, concerning *qawwamah*, which is often literally interpreted as a legitimacy for male leadership and superiority within the domestic sphere [2]. In socio-religious practice, this understanding frequently serves as a normative foundation in homiletics, family counseling, and popular Islamic legal discourse, positioning men as the primary holders of structural domestic authority [3]. Amidst the increasing roles and capacities of women across various sectors, such literalist readings create a tension between normative texts and contemporary social realities, thereby necessitating a more contextual and egalitarian interpretation [4].

The urgency of this issue is increasingly evident within the Indonesian context, where cases of violence against women remain significant, as reported by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan). This reality is inextricably linked to a deep-seated patriarchal culture that, in certain instances, derives justification from gender-biased religious understandings [5]. Conversely, the Quran normatively affirms spiritual equality and the shared moral responsibilities of men and women as fellow servants and vicegerents (*khalifah*) on earth [6]. The tension between the normative principle of equality and hierarchical social practices renders gender-oriented exegesis both relevant and imperative

In the history of exegesis (*tafsir*), the construction of gender relations reveals a broad spectrum of perspectives. Some classical interpretations tend to reinforce patriarchal structures through a tradition-based approach (*riwayah*) and an emphasis on male authority [7]. Conversely, various contemporary commentators (*mufassir*) offer more egalitarian readings. Scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asghar Ali Engineer, and Riffat Hassan seek to reconstruct gender relations based on the principles of justice and ontological equality [8]. In the global academic sphere, Asma Barlas's work *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* has provided a crucial theoretical foundation for Islamic gender hermeneutics, asserting that the Quran actually supports full equality between men and women when read correctly without patriarchal bias [9]. In line with this, Kecia Ali, in *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, critiques how the construction of historical fiqh has shaped understandings that place women in a subordinate position [10].

Conceptually, the discourse of Islamic feminism has evolved into a transnational movement that transcends local boundaries and intersects with broader hegemonic power structures [11]. This movement not only responds to text-based patriarchy but also confronts the global hegemony of discourse on faith and gender within the context of modernity [12]. Within a hermeneutic framework, feminist readings of the Qur'anic narrative have revealed dimensions of equality that have often been distorted by male dominance in interpretive practices throughout history [13]. Furthermore, contemporary studies emphasize the need for a multidisciplinary approach in examining gender relations in Islam that integrates linguistic, theological, and sociological dimensions [14].

However, studies on gender exegesis have so far focused primarily on the Middle East and South Asia, while the exegetical tradition of the Nusantara has received relatively little systematic attention. In fact, the dynamics of exegesis in Indonesia demonstrate significant development, ranging from classical works such as *Tarjumân al-Mustafîd* by Abd al-Rauf Singkel to contemporary exegeses like *Tafsir Al-Mishbah* by M. Quraish Shihab. In addition, there are also contributions from progressive thinkers such as Husein Muhammad, who explicitly deconstructs patriarchal exegesis [15]. These developments indicate that the discourse on gender exegesis in Indonesia is not monolithic but exists within a tension between normative-traditional approaches and contextual-progressive readings [16].

Although gender exegesis studies are increasingly developing within Islamic studies in Indonesia, research on contemporary exegetes who specifically interpret gender-related verses in their exegetical works remains relatively limited. In this context, the figure of Ahmad Sarwat is particularly worth examining [17]. He is known as a contemporary Indonesian scholar with a normative fiqh orientation that emphasizes practical legal aspects and textual provisions in addressing the community's concerns. The emergence of figures like Ahmad Sarwat cannot be separated from the transformation of the religious authority landscape in the digital age. Religious authority is no longer limited to institutional clerics but is also shaped by digital platforms that enable the widespread dissemination of fatwas and interpretations to urban Muslim audiences [18]. Ahmad Sarwat's influence itself is not built solely through formal academic channels but also through digital platforms and popular da'wah that reach a far broader audience. This phenomenon reflects a form of religious populism shaped by the logic of social media, while also marking a fundamental restructuring in how religious authority is produced, distributed, and received within the digital environment [19].

Through his exegetical work, *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh*, Ahmad Sarwat presents a systematic Indonesian-language exegesis aimed at contemporary urban Muslim readers. This exegesis integrates classical and modern references while emphasizing a legal orientation and normative certainty. These characteristics make it representative of the normative Islamic understanding that has a broad influence on the formation of public religious opinion [20].

The selection of *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* in this study is based on several considerations. First, this exegesis is a relatively new and comprehensive work that has emerged within the landscape of digital da'wah and popular Islamic literacy. Second, the normative-fiqh approach it advocates has not been extensively studied from a gender-based exegesis perspective, which has traditionally focused more on hermeneutic or progressive approaches. Third, to date, no academic research has specifically analyzed the construction of gender relations in this exegesis, particularly by linking several key verses within a unified analytical framework [21]. This situation highlights the existence of an important research gap, particularly in analyzing how verses such as QS. An-Nisa' verses 1, 11, and 34 are understood within the normative fiqh framework proposed by Ahmad Sarwat.

To date, research on exegesis and gender relations has expanded significantly. Various studies have examined gender constructions in Qur'anic exegesis, both in global and Indonesian contexts. Previous studies have analyzed QS. An-Nisa' verse 34 from a gender relations perspective. The study by Muhammad Dhafin Rizki Ramadhan et al. highlights the concept of *qawwamah* as a debate between responsibility and authority, referencing classical exegeses such as Ibn Kathir as well as contemporary exegetes like M. Quraish Shihab and Amina Wadud, and concludes that *qawwamah* is more appropriately understood as a moral and social responsibility, not as a legitimization of male dominance [22]. The research by Imelda Aprilia et al. compares the interpretations of M. Quraish Shihab in *Tafsir Al-Misbah* and Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy in *Tafsir An-Nur*, which emphasize the values of equality and leadership as a trust [23]. Meanwhile, the study by Syauqi Musfirah Daud Pisba et al. on Rasyid Ridha's interpretation in *Tafsir al-Manar* shows that *qawwamah* is understood as an ethical authority grounded in responsibility, not as a justification for violence or absolute male superiority [24].

Contemporary Qur'anic gender discourse has given rise to diverse methodological perspectives that engage in dialogue with one another. Omaima Abou-Bakr, in her study on the interpretive legacy of *qiwamah* as an exegetical construct, asserts that this concept has undergone a layered interpretive process laden with patriarchal content throughout the history of Islamic exegesis [25]. Ziba Mir-Hosseini and her contributors in *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority*

in Muslim Legal Tradition propose a fundamental reinterpretation of the concepts of *qiwamah* and male authority within the Islamic legal tradition, arguing that these concepts are products of specific historical contexts and not eternal normative dictates [26]. These studies form a global intellectual current that serves as a crucial backdrop for the analysis of Nusantara exegesis, including the work of Ahmad Sarwat, and underscore the urgency of contextualization in the reading of religious texts pertaining to gender relations.

Various studies indicate that Quranic Surah An-Nisa' verse 34 has been extensively examined from classical, modern, and Nusantara exegetical perspectives. However, these studies generally focus on a single verse (QS. An-Nisa: 34) or on established exegetes within academic discourse. No study has yet been found that comprehensively examines the construction of gender relations in Ahmad Sarwat's *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh*, particularly by linking three key verses within a single analytical framework: QS. An-Nisa' verse 1 (the origin of humanity) [27], verse 11 (inheritance distribution) [28], and verse 34 (*qawwamah*) [22]. Yet, these three verses form the conceptual structure of gender relations in the Qur'an: ontological, socio-economic, and structural.

Over the past decade, studies on gender-based interpretation in Indonesia have identified two main currents of interpretation. The first current is the progressive-hermeneutic group, represented by figures such as M. Quraish Shihab and Husein Muhammad. Studies of this group reveal efforts to deconstruct patriarchal interpretations by emphasizing the principle of universal justice and the method of *mubadalah*, or reciprocity. The second current is the traditional-classical group, which generally studies classical Islamic texts in Islamic boarding schools, where the construction of gender relations is still viewed as a hierarchical divine decree. However, there is a significant research gap in the current academic landscape. Few studies have systematically examined "Urban-Popular Exegesis" grounded in normative *fiqh*. Yet, this segment exerts a vast influence on the Muslim middle class through digital platforms.

This is where the academic urgency of this research lies. The figure of Ahmad Sarwat, with his work *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh*, represents a new and highly influential religious authority within Indonesia's urban environment. Unlike academic exegetes who tend to be philosophical, Sarwat offers a normative *fiqh* approach that emphasizes practical legal certainty. Analyzing Sarwat's interpretation of QS. An-Nisa: 1, 11, and 34 is crucial for understanding how gender ideology is reproduced in the popular literature consumed by society today. If popular exegesis continues to perpetuate gender-biased readings without contextualization, efforts to achieve egalitarian gender relations in Indonesia will remain at an impasse. This study fills a gap in the literature by

conducting a critical analysis of Sarwat's work, which has yet to receive adequate attention within the discourse on gender exegesis in Indonesia.

Based on this background, this study aims to provide an in-depth description of Ahmad Sarwat's interpretation of the trilogy of gender verses in Surah An-Nisa: 1, 11, and 34, encompassing ontological, economic, and structural dimensions, while analyzing the patterns of gender relations constructed through the normative fiqh framework in Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh. Furthermore, this study also seeks to assess the methodological position of this exegesis within the landscape of gender discourse in Indonesia, to determine whether it offers a moderate reinterpretation or, conversely, reproduces a hierarchical paradigm. These three objectives move systematically from the textual-exegetical level examining how the text is interpreted to the ideological level examining the patterns of gender construction that are reproduced and finally to the epistemological level examining the methodological position within academic discourse thereby forming a unified analytical framework that is descriptive, analytical, and evaluative.

Method

This study is a qualitative study employing an interpretive library research design. This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth analysis of the meaning, argumentative structure, and intellectual framework of Ahmad Sarwat's Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh regarding gender relations.

The primary data source for this study is Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh by Ahmad Sarwat, specifically the exegesis of QS. An-Nisa: 1, 11, and 34. Secondary data sources include classical Islamic literature, contemporary exegeses, as well as books and scholarly journals relevant to gender theory and Qur'anic hermeneutics.

The analysis was conducted through a gender framework in exegetical studies, operationalized across three dimensions: (1) the ontological dimension, namely how the exegete interprets the origins of human creation; (2) the socio-economic dimension, namely the arguments behind the distribution of inheritance rights and financial responsibilities; and (3) the structural dimension, namely the concept of qawwamah and power relations within the domestic sphere. These three dimensions serve as indicators for the categorization of exegetical typologies.

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation and close reading of the exegetical sections discussing these three verses. The data were then classified based on the three dimensions of analysis mentioned above.

Data analysis employed a combination of content analysis and textual interpretation. The analysis process was carried out in four stages: first, the identification and inventory of exegetical texts on the three selected verses; second, linguistic and intertextual analysis to trace scriptural references and the lexical tendencies employed; third, the categorization of interpretations into gender relations typologies; and fourth, the comparison and synthesis of findings with contemporary gender exegesis theories, particularly the theory of *mubadalah*. To enhance analytical transparency and credibility, the following explicit criteria are established to classify Ahmad Sarwat's interpretive positions into three typologies of gender relations based on three dimensions of analysis:

Hierarchical Typology: An interpretation is categorized as hierarchical if it meets the following indicators in the majority of dimensions: Ontological dimension: women are stated to have been created from or for men, so that women's inferiority is viewed as a natural condition. Socio-economic dimension: Differences in inheritance shares are interpreted as a reflection of women's subordination or inferiority, rather than merely a proportional division of the financial burden. Structural dimension: *Qawwamah* is understood as men's absolute domination or control over women within the household.

Moderate Typology: An interpretation is categorized as moderate if it meets the following indicators in the majority of dimensions: Ontological dimension: women and men are viewed as substantially equal, yet differences in roles are acknowledged as contextual or sociological in nature, not inherently hierarchical. Socio-economic dimension: Differences in inheritance shares are explained proportionally based on differences in the burden of financial support, not as an indication of male superiority [29]. Structural dimension: *Qawwamah* is understood as conditional functional leadership, that is, dependent on the fulfillment of financial support and capacity, not as permanent domination.

Egalitarian Typology: An interpretation is categorized as egalitarian if it meets the following indicators in the majority of dimensions: Ontological dimension: women and men are declared absolutely equal without any ontological or functional hierarchy. Socio-economic dimension: the distribution of inheritance should be equal without considering differences in the burden of financial support as justification. Structural dimension: *qawwamah* is understood as a relational and reciprocal concept; leadership of the household can be undertaken by anyone based on capacity, not gender.

Categorization is dominant, not absolute: an interpretation is categorized into a particular typology if the indicators in the majority of dimensions point toward that typology. If there are inconsistencies across dimensions, these are noted as separate findings indicating a hybrid position within the discourse map

of gender interpretation. With this approach, this study is expected to make an academic contribution to the development of Nusantara interpretation studies while enriching the discourse on gender justice within the context of contemporary Indonesian Islam.

Result and Discussion

The Historical and Methodological Setting of Ahmad Sarwat's Exegesis

His full name is Ahmad Sarwat, Lc., M.A., a prominent Indonesian Muslim scholar and intellectual recognized as the founder and director of *Rumah Fiqih Indonesia* (RFI) [23]. Born and raised in Jakarta within a religious family environment, he was instilled with the foundational principles of Islamic education from an early age. He pursued his higher education at the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, within the Faculty of Sharia. During his tenure there, he systematically studied Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*), and the methodology of legal derivation (*istinbat*) [24]. This Middle Eastern academic environment significantly shaped his intellectual character, which remains firmly rooted in the *madhhab* (school of law) tradition while remaining responsive to contemporary issues

Upon returning from Saudi Arabia, Ahmad Sarwat became actively involved in proselytization (*da'wa*) and the development of jurisprudential literacy tailored for urban communities. He established *Rumah Fiqih Indonesia*, an educational institution focused on teaching practical *fiqh* through a systematic and contextual approach [25]. His presence reflects the transformation of religious authority in the digital era, characterized by scholars utilizing online media to expand the reach of their religious outreach [26].

As a prolific author, Ahmad Sarwat has produced dozens of books focusing on the jurisprudence of worship (*ibadah*), transactions (*muamalah*), family matters, and contemporary issues. His intellectual character tends to be moderate and argumentative, employing an approach that integrates classical references with the needs of modern society. This phenomenon aligns with the development of urban clerical authority within the contemporary Indonesian Islamic landscape [27].

Within the landscape of Indonesian Islamic scholarship, Ahmad Sarwat is inextricably linked to his contributions to literacy and the production of written works. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, scholarly authority is constructed not only through oral transmission but also through the documentation of ideas in the form of treatises or books [28]. The dozens of works he has produced encompass various branches of Islamic knowledge, with a primary focus on the

jurisprudence of worship (*ibadah*) and transactions (*muamalah*). Nevertheless, his contributions are not limited to *fiqh* alone. One of his significant works is a commentary (*tafsir*), which demonstrates the breadth of his intellectual spectrum and his engagement with the discipline of Quranic studies. The existence of this exegetical work illustrates that his intellectual orientation is not merely normative-practical but also hermeneutical and textual, as it seeks to bridge the understanding of Quranic verses with the needs of contemporary Muslim society [29].

In terms of methodology, his works tend to be structured using an argumentative pattern: beginning with the formulation of the problem, presenting evidence (*dalil*) from the Quran and Hadith, citing various schools of legal thought (*madhhab*), and culminating in a comparative analysis (*tarjih*) accompanied by rational explanations [30]. This pattern demonstrates a continuity between the *turath* tradition (classical heritage) and the contextual approach prevalent within modern Islamic legal discourse in Indonesia.

Beyond the substance of his scholarship, the distributive aspect of his work further solidifies his prominence. His books circulate not only in print format but have also become an integral part of the digital proselytization (*da'wa*) ecosystem. This phenomenon situates him within the transformative wave of religious authority in the new media era, where textual production serves as a primary vehicle for constructing intellectual influence [31]. Consequently, Ahmad Sarwat's prominence through his written works can be understood as an integration between the classical clerical tradition which asserts authority through scholarly treatises (*kitab*) and the modern urban clerical model that is adaptive to technological advancements and the contemporary needs of the *ummah*[32].

One of the exegetical works he authored is *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh*, a commentary written in the Indonesian language. The use of Indonesian reflects a proselytizing (*da'wa*) and educational orientation aimed at the Indonesian Muslim community, ensuring they gain a systematic and communicative understanding of the Quran [33].

This exegesis was compiled gradually over approximately three years, following the order of the *mushaf* (canonical order), beginning from Surah Al-Fatihah to Surah An-Nas, thereby covering the entirety of the 30 *juz* of the Quran [34]. The work has been published in a multi-volume printed format, with chapters organized into specific volumes to enhance readability and ease of use for the reader [35].

In terms of systematics, *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* employs the *tahlili* (analytical) method, which involves interpreting the Quran verse by verse according to the canonical order of the *mushaf*. Each discussion commences with an introduction to the surah, followed by the grouping of verses for partial thematic analysis [43].

In his interpretation, Ahmad Sarwat explains the meanings of key vocabulary, linguistic aspects (*nahwu* and *sharaf*) when necessary, cites the *asbab al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation), and derives legal implications as well as moral lessons from the verses [44]. The approach utilized integrates *tafsir bil ma'thur* (tradition-based exegesis) and *tafsir bil ra'yi* (reason-based exegesis) [36]. Regarding its references, the interpretation demonstrates the influence of classical exegetical literature such as *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, and *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an* [37]. Characteristically, this exegesis can be categorized as *fiqhi-lughawi* (legal-linguistic), with a strong emphasis on jurisprudential aspects and linguistic analysis [38].

One of the most significant conceptual contributions identified through the study of *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* is a phenomenon proposed in this paper as "Urban-Popular Exegesis." This concept refers to the practice of Qur'anic exegesis that simultaneously combines three main characteristics: (1) an urban audience orientation aimed at educated urban communities in need of systematic yet not overly technical religious explanations; (2) the adoption of digital media disseminated through digital platforms, popular books, and the online da'wah ecosystem [39]; and (3) the retention of classical methodology, maintaining the methodological framework of classical exegesis (*tahlili*, *fiqhi-lughawi*, *bi al-ma'tsur*) even though it is presented in a more communicative and contextual language.

Interpretation of the Gender-Related Verses

Surah An-Nisa, Verse 1

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا
وْنِسَاءً ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

O humanity, be conscious of your Lord, who created you from a single soul and created from it its mate, and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and [cherish] the ties of kinship. Indeed, Allah is ever, over you, an Observer

In *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* [40], Ahmad Sarwat explains that this verse commences with the vocative expression '*ya ayyuhan-nās*' (O mankind), indicating that the message contained therein is addressed to all of humanity. This call is not restricted to believers alone but encompasses all human beings, regardless of their faith backgrounds. Nevertheless, scholars have reached a consensus that this verse is classified as a *Madaniyah* verse

The command '*ittaqu rabbakum*' is understood as an exhortation to attain *taqwa* (God-consciousness) toward Allah. Ahmad Sarwat explains that the

meaning of *taqwa* encompasses more than just fear; it signifies self-preservation and the enhancement of the quality of one's faith. Thus, *taqwa* serves as the fundamental cornerstone for constructing both individual and social life.

Regarding the phrase '*alladhī khalaqakum min nafsin wāḥidah*', Ahmad Sarwat asserts that all human beings were created from a single soul, namely the Prophet Adam. All human descendants originate from the same figure, implying that humanity is, in essence, one large extended family [50]. This explanation is reinforced by an elaboration on various religious perspectives and scientific theories concerning human origins, which ultimately lead to the conclusion that mankind shares a single source of creation

Furthermore, the phrase '*wa khalaqa minhā zaujahā*' is explained as the creation of a partner for Adam, namely Eve (Hawwa). Ahmad Sarwat cites the majority of scholars who understand that Eve was created from Adam's rib, as mentioned in the hadith narrated in Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim. However, he also posits that the understanding of this hadith can be viewed both literally and as a form of symbolic expression

Regarding the phrase '*wa battsa minhumā rijālan katsīran wa nisā'an*', Ahmad Sarwat explains that from this initial pair, Allah multiplied humanity and dispersed them to various corners of the earth. The word *battsa* is understood as dispersal or procreation. He also addresses the usage of the word *katsīran* (many) as it is attached to *rijālan* (men), explaining this phenomenon through the lens of *balaghah* (Arabic rhetoric) as well as the practical reality of the *nasab* (lineage) system within society

The subsequent part, '*wattaqullāh alladzī tasā'alūna bihī wal-arḥām*', is interpreted as a command to maintain social relations and kinship. The term *al-arḥām* serves as a reminder of the paramount importance of uterine ties and the bonds of *silaturahim*. This verse demonstrates that *taqwa* (God-consciousness) toward Allah is not merely vertical in nature but also encompasses social responsibility in preserving familial relationships.

The verse concludes with the statement '*inna Allāha kāna 'alaikum raqībā*', asserting that Allah is Ever-Watchful over all human actions. This affirmation reinforces the message that every human relationship and deed remains under His constant divine supervision.

The identification of "*nafs wāḥidah*" as Adam AS places Sarwat within the mainstream of classical exegesis. However, this position requires hermeneutical critique. Nasaruddin Umar argues that "*nafs wahidah*" is in the *nakirah* (indefinite) form, not the *ma'rifah* (definite) form, and thus does not necessarily refer to Adam as a historical individual, but rather to the universal, foundational essence of human origins [41]. This hermeneutical difference has far-reaching gender implications: if *nafs wāḥidah* is interpreted as "the human species," as M.

Quraish Shihab does in Tafsir Al-Mishbah, then the relationship between men and women from the time of creation is one of equality and lacks hierarchy [42].

The interpretive tension becomes increasingly apparent in the explanation of “*wa khalaqa minhā zaujahā.*” The choice to interpret the creation of Eve literally from Adam’s rib even when accompanied by a note regarding the possibility of a symbolic meaning structurally places women in a position of ontological dependence on men [53]. This understanding is identified as the effect of patriarchal culture on Islamic interpretation, where certain traditions are used to establish a gender hierarchy at the level of creation. Sarwat does not entirely avoid reproducing this construction, although he uses more cautious language compared to classical exegetes like Ibn Kathir, who explicitly states that Eve was created from Adam’s left rib while he slept, without the slightest narrative doubt [43].

Within the landscape of Indonesian gender exegesis, Sarwat’s position on this verse can be categorized as moderate-conservative: moderate because she employs inclusive language and does not rule out symbolic interpretations; conservative because the ontological framework she maintains continues to reproduce classical assumptions about the origin of women that potentially legitimize gender subordination. Zaitunah Subhan asserts that the reconstruction of gender understanding in Islam must begin precisely at this point—by deconstructing patriarchal interpretations of women’s origins—so that more substantive changes in gender relations can be achieved [44].

Surah An-Nisa, Verse 11

يُوصِيكُمُ اللَّهُ فِي أَوْلَادِكُمْ لِلذَّكَرِ مِثْلُ حَظِّ الْأُنثَيَيْنِ ۚ فَإِن كُنَّ نِسَاءً فَوْقَ اثْنَتَيْنِ فَلَهُنَّ ثُلُثَا مَا تَرَكَ ۚ وَإِن كَانَتْ وَاحِدَةً فَلَهَا النِّصْفُ ۚ وَلِأَبَوَيْهِ لِكُلِّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا السُّدُسُ مِمَّا تَرَكَ إِن كَانَ لَهُ وَلَدٌ ۚ فَإِن لَّمْ يَكُن لَّهُ وَلَدٌ وَوَرِثَهُ أَبُوهُ فَلِأُمِّهِ الثُّلُثُ ۚ فَإِن كَانَ لَهُ إِخْوَةٌ فَلِأُمِّهِ السُّدُسُ ۚ مِن بَعْدِ وَصِيَّةٍ يُوصِي بِهَا أَوْ دَيْنٍ ۚ آبَاؤُكُمْ وَأَبْنَاؤُكُمْ لَا تَدْرُونَ أَيُّهُمْ أَقْرَبُ لَكُمْ نَفَعًا ۚ فَرِيضَةٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا

Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females. If there are [only] women, two or more, for them is two-thirds of one’s estate. And if there is only one, for her is half. And for one’s parents, to each of them is a sixth of his estate if he left children. But if he had no children and the parents [alone] inherit from him, then for his mother is one-third. And if he had brothers [or sisters], for his mother is a sixth, after any bequest he [may have] made or debt. Your parents or your children — you know not which of them are nearest to you in benefit. [These shares are] an obligation [imposed] by Allah. Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Wise

In this section, Ahmad Sarwat [40] explains that the 11th verse of Surah An-Nisa serves as a fundamental pillar within the Islamic inheritance legal system. Many scholars reach a consensus that this verse abrogates (*nasakh*) the previous provision regarding the obligation of bequests, as mentioned in Surah Al-Baqarah: 180, which formerly required individuals to make a will before their passing. With the revelation of this verse, the mechanism of inheritance distribution is no longer left to the personal discretion of the testator; rather, it is established directly by Allah SWT as a divine mandate.

Regarding the phrase '*yūṣīkumullāh*', Ahmad Sarwat explains that, linguistically, it means 'Allah bequeaths to you' or 'Allah advises you.' However, in practice, translators such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia and Buya Hamka translate it as 'Allah legislates' (*mensyariatkan*) or 'makes obligatory' (*mewajibkan*). This indicates that the 'bequest' (*wasiat*) within the context of this verse is not merely a recommendation, but a legally binding decree.

The phrase '*fī awlādikum*' is understood as a provision concerning the distribution of inheritance for children. The mention of children in the primary sequence indicates that the most fundamental line of inheritance flows from parents to their offspring. However, Ahmad Sarwat also asserts that the Islamic inheritance system is not exclusively unidirectional, as under specific conditions, parents are also entitled to inherit from their children's estate.

The provision '*lidz-dzakari mitslu hadh-dhil untsayain*' is understood as the rule that a male's share is equal to that of two females. The emphasis here is placed on biological sex rather than age, birth order, or marital status. Sons and daughters are treated equally as legitimate biological offspring, provided their lineage (*nasab*) is legally valid under Sharia law. In practice, this 2:1 ratio applies when the deceased is survived by both male and female children.

Ahmad Sarwat further explains the second condition: when the deceased has only female children numbering more than two. In such circumstances, they collectively receive two-thirds of the estate, as stated in the phrase '*fa lahunna tsulutsā mā tarak*.' Conversely, if there is only one daughter, she is entitled to half of the inheritance. This one-half share constitutes one of the largest fixed portions (*furūd*) within the Islamic inheritance system.

The verse further elucidates the shares of the parents. In the phrase '*wa li-abawaihi li-kulli wāhidin minhumā as-sudus*', it is stipulated that each parent—the father and the mother—receives one-sixth if the deceased has children. This demonstrates that inheritance can flow upward from the offspring to the parents.

However, if the deceased leaves no children, the mother receives one-third, while the remainder is allocated to the father based on the principle of *'asabah* (residuaries), as reinforced by the hadith narrated in Sahih Bukhari regarding the distribution of the remaining estate to the nearest male relative.

Ahmad Sarwat further elaborates on the three distinct scenarios concerning a mother's inheritance share: receiving one-sixth if the deceased has children; receiving one-third if the deceased has no children; and in specific cases—known in Islamic jurisprudence as *Umariyatain*—receiving one-third of the remainder (*thuluth al-baqi*) after the share of the surviving spouse has been deducted. This detailed explanation demonstrates that the Islamic inheritance system is characterized by a precise and systematic mathematical structure

Regarding the phrase *'min ba'di wasiyyatin yūshā bihā aw dain'*, it is emphasized that the distribution of inheritance takes place only after bequests are fulfilled and debts are settled. Ahmad Sarwat explains that although bequests are mentioned prior to debts in the Quranic text, in jurisprudential practice (*fiqh*), the settlement of debts must take priority. Furthermore, a bequest cannot be granted to a legal heir, as affirmed by the Prophetic tradition (*hadith*)

The verse concludes with the statement, *'ābā'ukum wa abnā'ukum lā tadrūna ayyuhum aqrabu lakum naf'ā'*. Ahmad Sarwat interprets this to mean that human beings are incapable of objectively determining whether parents or children offer a greater benefit, as human judgment is profoundly influenced by emotion and subjectivity. Consequently, Allah assumes full authority over the determination of inheritance laws to prevent any form of injustice.

The closing of the verse, *'farīḍatan minallāh, innallāha kāna 'alīman ḥakīmā'*, reinforces that these inheritance provisions are divinely mandated obligations. Allah's attributes as All-Knowing and All-Wise serve as the fundamental basis for the premise that this distribution system is the most appropriate and just according to the perspective of Sharia.

A critical reading of Sarwat's interpretation of this verse reveals a fundamental tension between ta'abbudi (normative obedience) and substantive gender justice. Sarwat consistently uses the closing phrase of the verse, "farīḍatan minallāh," to close the space for ijihad regarding the 2:1 provision a move that, methodologically, can be categorized as a rejection of the dynamic Maqashid asy-Syariah approach. He does not question whether the ratio legis (*'illah*) of the 2:1 division based on the assumption of men's financial responsibility remains relevant in contemporary reality, where many Indonesian women have become the family's primary breadwinners.

The sharpest contrast emerges when comparing Sarwat's position with the contextualist discourse. Munawir Syadjali notes that contextualists argue the 2:1 ratio during the Prophet's time was a revolutionary breakthrough because it granted inheritance rights to women who previously had none; however, in the contemporary era, this figure must be interpreted in the spirit of substantive justice according to women's actual economic contributions [45]. Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir [46], through the mubadalah method, further asserts that inheritance instruments must be viewed as a social protection mechanism for the vulnerable, not merely as a formal legal structure [47]. Sarwat implicitly rejects both of these approaches.

What warrants deeper scrutiny is the absence of a sociological dimension in Sarwat's interpretation. He does not address the reality that in contemporary Indonesia particularly in the urban settings where the audience of Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh resides the proportion of female-headed households continues to rise, rendering the structural assumption of "men as the sole breadwinners" which underpins the rationalization of the 2:1 division increasingly devoid of sociological relevance. Husein Muhammad asserts that a responsive women's fiqh must be able to interpret this social reality [48], and Sarwat's failure to do so reinforces the model of digital patriarchy: online religious authorities that reproduce patriarchal norms with a far more massive reach than conventional printed interpretations.

Surah An-Nisa, Verse 34

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ ۗ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَنَاطُتٌ ۖ حَافِظَاتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ ۗ وَاللَّاتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ ۗ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا كَبِيرًا

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct (*nushūz*), admonish them [first], [Next], refuse to share their beds, and [last] strike them [lightly]; but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means [of annoyance]: For Allah is Most High, great [above you all].

Ahmad Sarwat explains that this verse is intrinsically linked to the preceding one, Surah An-Nisa [4]: 32 [49], which prohibits envy regarding the

distinct favors Allah has bestowed upon some individuals over others, including the differing inheritance rights between men and women. While the previous verse establishes the disparity in inheritance portions, verse 34 clarifies the specific roles and responsibilities assigned to each sex within the framework of domestic life.

The phrase '*ar-rijālu qawwāmūna 'alan-nisā'*' is understood not merely as men being leaders, but also as those held responsible for women. The term *qawwāmūn* signifies a form of leadership that entails responsibility, protection, and management. This leadership does not exist without a foundation; rather, it is accompanied by two primary reasons explicitly mentioned within the verse.

First, '*bimā faḍḍalallāhu ba'dahum 'alā ba'd'*', which signifies that Allah has bestowed more [favors] upon some over others. Ahmad Sarwat elaborates on the linguistic structure of this phrase, noting that the verb *faḍḍala* means 'to favor' or 'to bestow excellence,' with Allah identified as the subject (*fā'il*) of the sentence. The term *ba'dahum* refers to men, while '*alā ba'd*' refers to women.

In explaining the nature of this excellence, Ahmad Sarwat cites the views of several exegetes. Among them is the account provided by Al-Tabari in *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, which narrates that the revelation of this verse was triggered by an incident involving an Ansar man who slapped his wife. The wife reported the incident to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and demanded *qishash* (retributive justice). As the Messenger of Allah was about to ordain *qishash*, this verse was revealed. Other narrations state that if a husband injures his wife, he is not subject to *qishash* but is required to pay *diyat* (blood money); however, if he commits murder, the death penalty remains applicable.

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Ahmad Sarwat also references the perspectives of several exegetes, such as Al-Mawardi in *An-Nukat wa al-'Uyun*, who touches upon the superiority of men in terms of intellect and judgment. However, in his elaboration, Ahmad Sarwat underscores that differences in brain volume or biological aspects do not

automatically signify an inherent superiority in intelligence, as human intellect is influenced by various factors, such as education and environment.

The second reason for male leadership is '*wa bimā anfaqu min amwālihīm*', which pertains to men providing financial maintenance for the family. This financial responsibility serves as a fundamental cornerstone within the structural leadership of the household.

Furthermore, the phrase '*faṣ-ṣālihātu qānitāt ḥāfiẓāt lil-ghaib bimā ḥafizallāh*' delineates the characteristics of righteous women. Ahmad Sarwat interprets 'righteous women' as those who are obedient to Allah and to their husbands in matters that are *ma'ruf* (proper and good), while safeguarding their honor and the rights of the household in the husband's absence..

Regarding the phrase '*wallātī takhāfūna nusyūzahunna*', *nushūz* is defined as defiance or non-compliance within the domestic context. The verse outlines a three-stage resolution process: first, admonishment; second, the separation of sleeping quarters; and third, striking. Ahmad Sarwat emphasizes that the act of striking is not intended to inflict pain or physical injury; rather, it must be conducted within non-harmful limits and serves only as a last resort when the two preceding stages have failed to achieve reconciliation.

The verse concludes with the warning, '*fa in aṭa'nakum falā tabghū 'alaihinna sabīlā*', signifying that if the wives have returned to obedience, husbands are strictly forbidden from seeking pretexts to annoy or mistreat them. The closing statement, '*inna Allāha kāna 'aliyyan kabīrā*', reaffirms that Allah is Most High and Most Great; thus, a husband who is granted the position of leadership must not abuse his authority, as he remains under the ultimate sovereignty of the Almighty.

Sarwat's interpretation of this verse constructs *qiwāmah* as a sex-based authority, not an authority based on individual competence. This is a hermeneutical choice that warrants serious critique. By citing An-Nasafi, who details men's superiority in physical aspects and "thinking ability" without critically contextualizing these statements [50], Sarwat reproduces gender essentialism that posits masculine superiority as a biological-ontological reality. The same point is identified by Siti Musdah Mulia in her study on women's leadership: that biological claims regarding male superiority in classical interpretations lack adequate scientific grounding and are more a patriarchal cultural construct cloaked in theological language [51].

Ahmadiy, in his study on *qiwāmah* from a contemporary perspective, demonstrates that *qiwāmah* is not a statement of essential male superiority, but

rather a conditional sociological function: it applies only when the condition of financial support is met [52]. If the wife contributes economically or even becomes the primary breadwinner, the material basis of *qiwāmah* collapses, and thus male sole authority shifts. Sarwat does not open the possibility for this reinterpretation, even though the reality of urban Indonesian families increasingly reflects this pattern.

The most critical point academically is the retention of the three-stage mechanism of *nusyūz*, including the dimension of physical abuse. Although Sarwat qualifies this with the phrase “not painful,” she does not conduct a critical analysis of the psychological and social implications of legitimizing a husband’s physical actions against his wife. Lies Marcoes-Natsir notes that within the dynamics of urban Muslim families in Indonesia, the religious legitimization of violence even the mildest form contributes to an imbalance in power relations that leads to the structural subordination of women [53].

Ahmad Sarwat positions *qiwāmah* as a structural authority that is normative-doctrinal in nature. Consequently, *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* tends to reproduce hierarchical relationship patterns within urban Muslim families. Although he warns husbands against the abuse of power through the concluding phrase '*Inna Allāha kāna ‘aliyan kabīrā’*', his exegetical construction continues to place women in a subordinate position that requires supervision and discipline. This confirms that Sarwat prioritizes maintaining the stability of classical jurisprudential structures over offering a truly egalitarian formulation of gender relations.

Gender Analysis of the Interpretation of QS. An-Nisa’ [4]: 1; 11; 34

An examination of Surah An-Nisa verses 1, 11, and 34 in Ahmad Sarwat’s *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* reveals a gender relationship construct systematically built within a consistent, classical normative-jurisprudential (*fiqh*) framework. These three verses present three structural layers of male-female relations in Islam: ontological unity, differentiation in economic distribution, and differentiation in domestic authority. These layers do not exist in isolation; rather, they constitute a cohesive and mutually reinforcing conceptual architecture

In the interpretation of Surah An-Nisa verse 1, Ahmad Sarwat asserts that all human beings were created from a *nafs wāḥidah*, understood as the Prophet Adam. This interpretation carries theological implications of a unified human origin, devoid of gender distinction at the level of creation. Ontologically, both men and women share the same source of existence. However, when explaining the creation of his partner (Eve), he continues to refer to the majority view of

scholars, which is based on narrations in *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* regarding the creation from Adam's rib, while not precluding the possibility of symbolic interpretation. Consequently, this ontological unity is still understood within a traditional framework that does not explicitly deconstruct the hierarchical implications that may have evolved throughout the history of exegesis.

In the interpretation of verse 11, the construct of gender relations shifts from the ontological domain to the normative-economic sphere. The inheritance distribution, based on a 2:1 ratio between male and female children, is understood as a divine mandate (*farīdah*) that is binding and independent of subjective human preferences. This differentiation is explained within the framework of male financial responsibility as the primary provider for the family. Consequently, the larger share for men is interpreted not as a superiority of value, but rather as a consequence of the economic burden imposed upon them. Nevertheless, within a modern social structure where the economic roles of women may evolve, this interpretation maintains its classical construct without contextual reinterpretation. Economic distribution remains differential based on sex, and its normative legitimacy is sustained by the assumption of stable role divisions.

Surah An-Nisa verse 34 reinforces this differentiation within the domain of domestic authority through the concept of *qiwāmah*. Men are positioned as *qawwām* over women based on two foundations: certain inherent favors bestowed by Allah and the responsibility of financial maintenance (*nafaqah*). Ahmad Sarwat references classical exegetes such as Al-Tabari, An-Nasafi, and Al-Mawardi to explain the nature of these advantages, whether in physical aspects, public responsibilities, or the legal structures of *Shari'a*. Leadership is understood as a matter of responsibility and protection rather than absolute dominance. Nevertheless, structurally, the authoritative position remains firmly with the male.

In the matter of *nushūz*, the three-stage resolution mechanism—comprising admonishment, the separation of sleeping quarters, and striking within non-harmful limits—is maintained within a classical framework of understanding. While ethical restrictions are emphasized to prevent violence, there is no hermeneutical shift that eliminates the hierarchical elements within the relationship. The corrective authority remains in the hands of the husband, while the wife is positioned as the object of discipline and guidance when domestic tension arises.

From these three verses, it is evident that Ahmad Sarwat constructs gender relations within a complementary-hierarchical model. Equality is affirmed at the level of humanity and spiritual value, yet role differentiation is institutionalized at the level of family law. This structure is not based on claims of ontological female inferiority, but rather on a division of social functions perceived as mutually complementary. However, this functional division results in an asymmetrical distribution of authority and resources.

Methodologically, *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* demonstrates a strong consistency in its normative-jurisprudential (*fiqh*) approach, characterized by extensive references to classical exegesis and legal literature. The arguments are constructed through the internal coherence of the Islamic legal system rather than through contextual hermeneutics or a critique of gender discourse. Within the landscape of contemporary Indonesian gender exegesis, this position can be characterized as moderate-traditional: it maintains classical structures by emphasizing moral responsibility and ethical constraints, yet does so without providing a conceptual reformulation of the power relations between men and women.

Consequently, gender relations in this exegesis do not move toward an egalitarian model that places men and women within an equal distribution of authority and resources; instead, they remain within a framework of structured functional differentiation. The unity of human origin in verse 1 serves as the theological foundation, yet its normative translation in verses 11 and 34 results in a layered relational pattern: spiritually equal, economically differentiated, and domestically hierarchical. The coherence of this pattern indicates that Ahmad Sarwat's approach is not a partial reading of gender-related verses, but rather a representation of the Islamic family law system understood as a cohesive and unified normative whole.

Ahmad Sarwat's interpretation in *Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh* carries significant sociological implications for the construction of gender relations, namely the reinforcement of a Hierarchical-Static family model. By framing *qiwāmah* as a structural authority that is dogmatic in nature, this exegesis places the husband at the apex of power as a sole, non-interchangeable authority. Consequently, the relationship between husband and wife is no longer viewed as an equal partnership, but rather as a connection between the 'manager' and the 'managed.' This closes the space for more flexible domestic role negotiations; thus, despite the reality of urban society where many women contribute financially, their moral and juridical standing remains under male control.

Sarwat's emphasis on the aspect of female obedience (*qānitāt*) and the legitimacy of discipline through the stages of *nushūz* implies the emergence of a religiously legitimized subordination. Women are positioned as subjects who lack moral autonomy, thereby requiring physical supervision and guidance from men. Psychologically, this can perpetuate a sense of masculine superiority and hinder the realization of substantive gender justice, as domestic affection tends to be marginalized by a transactional-biological fulfillment of rights and obligations. Ultimately, this exegesis serves as a barrier to the adoption of the principle of reciprocity (*mubādalāh*), as it maintains a bastion of orthodoxy that posits female obedience as an absolute prerequisite for family stability, disregarding the Quranic moral ideal of egalitarian partnership.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Ahmad Sarwat's Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh constructs gender relations through the paradigm of the "Traditionalist Complementary Hierarchy," namely the separation between ontological-spiritual equality and sociological-juridical inequality of authority. Sarwat re-packages classical patriarchal authority using urban managerial language without altering its epistemological foundation, thereby functioning as an instrument of orthodox stability rather than egalitarian transformation. The implications of these findings suggest that the digitization of religious discourse does not automatically drive interpretive renewal; rather, digital platforms actually expand the reach of refined patriarchy to urban Muslim audiences on a massive scale. The moderation offered by Sarwat is ethical moderation that limits violence, not structural moderation that alters the hierarchy of gender power.

The contribution of this research lies in identifying a typology of Urban-Digital Exegesis that is progressive in form but conservative-formalistic in legal substance, as well as filling a gap in the literature regarding the reproduction of patriarchal bias within Indonesia's digital religious ecosystem. However, this study has limitations: the analysis covers only three verses and thus does not represent the entirety of gender constructions in this interpretation; the textual approach has not addressed the dimension of reader reception; and the limited biographical data on Sarwat restricts a more comprehensive contextualization of her hermeneutical choices.

Future research should explore female readers' reception of Tafsir Al-Mahfuzh to examine how this narrative of structural authority is negotiated within the domestic spaces of urban Muslims. Additionally, comparative studies across digital interpretations are needed to map the spectrum of Indonesia's religious gender discourse, as well as research on the role of platform algorithms in distributing religious authority. At the normative level, the development of a

contextual gender exegesis methodology responsive to the social realities of Indonesian women is an urgent necessity for the realization of substantive gender justice.

Author Contributions

Seri Asmita Harahap: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft. **Ida Kurnia Shofa:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing - Review & Editing. **Khoirun Nidhom:** Formal Analysis, Validation, Writing - Review & Editing. **Bensar A Muin:** Review & Editing.

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The authors used generative AI tools only to assist with language editing and manuscript preparation. The AI tools did not contribute to the study design, data analysis, interpretation of results, or conclusions. All scientific content, arguments, and interpretations presented in this article were developed and verified by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the manuscript.

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