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Revisiting Kafa'ah in Islamic Marriage: Between Classical Legal Doctrine, Gender Equality, and Contemporary Muslim Societies

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ABSTRACT

The concept of kafa'ah (marital compatibility) has long been an important consideration in classical Islamic family law, particularly in determining the suitability of prospective spouses based on religion, lineage, social status, occupation, and economic capacity. However, some traditional interpretations have raised critical questions regarding their relevance to gender equality and marital justice in contemporary Muslim societies. This study aims to critically examine the relationship between classical Islamic doctrines of kafa'ah and gender equality and to explore its reinterpretation through maqāṣid al-sharī'ah and gender justice perspectives. Employing a qualitative approach through library research, this study uses comparative doctrinal legal analysis and critical conceptual analysis of classical Islamic jurisprudence, contemporary scholarly literature, and relevant Islamic family law frameworks. The analysis suggests that while kafa'ah was historically intended to promote marital stability and social harmony, certain status-based criteria may reinforce social hierarchies and unequal gender relations. Furthermore, a maqāṣid al-sharī'ah-oriented reinterpretation provides a normative foundation for shifting marital compatibility from inherited social distinctions toward mutual respect, moral integrity, equal dignity, and shared responsibility. This study proposes a gender-just framework of marital compatibility that preserves the ethical objectives of Islamic marriage while responding to contemporary social transformations. Its contribution lies in advancing Islamic family law discourse by integrating classical legal reasoning with substantive gender equality and contextual marital justice.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between classical Islamic family law and contemporary principles of gender equality has become an increasingly important subject of scholarly debate, particularly as Muslim societies experience significant transformations in education, economic participation, family structures, and individual autonomy (Karimullah et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024). Within this changing environment, the concept of kafa'ah, commonly understood as compatibility or suitability between prospective spouses, occupies a significant position in Islamic marriage jurisprudence because it connects religious norms, social expectations, and the practical conditions considered necessary for establishing a harmonious family (Muzakki et al., 2024; Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024).

Classical Islamic jurists developed different interpretations of marital compatibility by considering religious commitment, moral character, lineage, social status, occupation, and economic circumstances, although the legal significance attributed to these criteria varies across schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Muzakki et al., 2024; Surya et al., 2024). Historically, such considerations were associated with attempts to safeguard marital stability, protect family interests, and minimize conflicts arising from differences in social background, yet their application also reflected the hierarchical social arrangements within which classical jurisprudential doctrines emerged (Muzakki et al., 2024; Munir, 2023).

In contemporary Muslim societies, however, increasing recognition of women's educational achievements, professional participation, and personal autonomy has generated new questions about the continued relevance of marital compatibility criteria that privilege inherited status or establish unequal expectations for prospective husbands and wives (Karimullah et al., 2024; Karimullah et al., 2023). These developments reveal a fundamental tension between preserving the ethical objectives of classical Islamic marriage doctrines and ensuring that their contemporary application respects individual dignity, meaningful consent, and substantive gender equality (Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024).

The tension becomes particularly visible when compatibility is interpreted primarily through lineage, wealth, or family prestige rather than through mutual moral responsibility and the practical capacity of both spouses to sustain a cooperative marital relationship (Ismail et al., 2024; Mubarok & Hermanto, 2023). Furthermore, the diversity of Muslim legal cultures demonstrates that kafa'ah cannot be adequately understood as an exclusively theological or doctrinal issue because its interpretation interacts with customary practices, community identities, and changing expectations regarding marriage (Munir, 2023; Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024). Contemporary discussions of gender justice in Islamic family law consequently require critical consideration of whether historically established marital compatibility criteria continue to serve legitimate family interests or inadvertently reproduce inequalities that conflict with the broader ethical commitments of Islamic law (Karimullah et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024).

From this perspective, revisiting kafa'ah is not simply an effort to abandon classical jurisprudence but an attempt to distinguish its enduring normative purposes from socially contingent interpretations that may require reassessment under contemporary conditions (Surya et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024). This distinction is particularly important for developing an understanding of Islamic marriage that recognizes religious continuity while responding critically to social transformation and changing conceptions of justice within Muslim families (Munir, 2023; Karimullah et al., 2024). Accordingly, the central scholarly challenge is to determine how kafa'ah can retain its ethical significance as a principle of marital compatibility without functioning as a mechanism for legitimizing social hierarchy or unequal gender relations (Ismail et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024).

Recent scholarship has examined the concept of kafa'ah from historical, doctrinal, sociological, and gender-oriented perspectives, demonstrating that its interpretation differs according to legal traditions and the social circumstances of Muslim communities (Muzakki et al., 2024; Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024). In Indonesia, Munir (2023) investigated marital equality through the interaction of Islamic law, state law, and customary law, highlighting the importance of legal pluralism in understanding how religious principles are interpreted and applied within diverse marriage traditions (Munir, 2023). A historical investigation by Muzakki et al. (2024) explored kafa'ah in pre-Islamic and early Islamic marriage practices, providing a basis for examining how social conditions influenced the development of marital compatibility as a legal and cultural concept (Muzakki et al., 2024).

Similarly, Surya et al. (2024) examined kafa'ah through the perspective of maṣlaḥah within the Maliki school, emphasizing the relationship between marital suitability and the pursuit of beneficial outcomes in family life (Surya et al., 2024). Empirical research among the Sayyid and Syarifah communities in Ternate, Indonesia, demonstrated that lineage-based compatibility continues to influence endogamous marriage practices and the preservation of collective family identity (Ismail et al., 2024). Research involving Generation Z in Kuningan, Indonesia, likewise indicated that younger Muslims continue to consider several compatibility criteria while often emphasizing religious commitment as an important consideration in choosing a marriage partner (Agustine & Supriyadi, 2023).

Beyond Indonesia, Mohd Kusrin et al. (2024) investigated understandings of marital compatibility among 355 Muslim respondents in Malaysia, demonstrating the continuing relevance of kafa'ah in contemporary discussions of partner selection and marital relationships (Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024). In Brunei Darussalam, Muawan and Sudin (2023) examined kafa'ah in relation to marital harmony and contemporary family disputes, integrating discussions of the four Sunni legal schools with qualitative evidence from family counselling institutions (Muawan & Sudin, 2023). Their study illustrates the practical importance of understanding compatibility as a multidimensional relationship involving religious expectations, social circumstances, and the ability of spouses to establish mutual understanding (Muawan & Sudin, 2023). Meanwhile, contemporary research on Islamic family law has increasingly examined gender equality through approaches that reconsider established religious interpretations rather than

treating historical jurisprudential formulations as the only possible expressions of Islamic legal principles (Karimullah et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024). Mufti (2024), for example, analyzed woman-initiated divorce in Indonesia through maqāṣid al-sharī'ah and argued that purposive Islamic legal reasoning provides opportunities to address gender justice within changing family circumstances (Mufti, 2024).

Karimullah et al. (2024) similarly employed feminist hermeneutics to challenge patriarchal assumptions in the interpretation of Islamic law, while Mubarok and Hermanto (2023) examined the balance of marital rights and responsibilities through gender equality and maqāṣid-oriented reasoning (Karimullah et al., 2024; Mubarok & Hermanto, 2023). Collectively, these studies establish the continuing social relevance of kafa'ah and provide important foundations for gender-sensitive legal interpretation, although their different substantive emphases create opportunities for further theoretical integration (Mufti, 2024; Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024).

Despite these contributions, the existing literature reveals an important analytical gap between studies that explain the historical and social application of kafa'ah and those that develop normative arguments for gender equality in Islamic family law (Muzakki et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024). Historical and doctrinal investigations have clarified the formation of marital compatibility criteria, but they have not consistently established a systematic framework for distinguishing indispensable religious and ethical considerations from historically contingent standards of lineage, occupational prestige, and socioeconomic hierarchy (Muzakki et al., 2024; Surya et al., 2024).

Conversely, empirical studies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei provide valuable evidence concerning contemporary understandings and practices of kafa'ah, yet their contextual findings do not by themselves resolve the broader jurisprudential question of whether compatibility requirements should apply equally to prospective husbands and wives (Ismail et al., 2024; Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024; Muawan & Sudin, 2023). This limitation is particularly significant because a principle originally intended to promote family welfare may produce unequal consequences when its interpretation privileges the status of one party or allows family expectations to override individual marital autonomy (Munir, 2023; Karimullah et al., 2024). Meanwhile, gender-oriented studies have demonstrated the potential of feminist hermeneutics and maqāṣid al-sharī'ah to advance justice in Islamic family law, but their principal analyses have not always focused specifically on the doctrinal structure, legal beneficiaries, and gendered operation of kafa'ah (Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024).

The available scholarship therefore suggests an underdeveloped connection between three analytical dimensions: the historical justification of compatibility criteria, their potentially asymmetric implications for gender relations, and the normative standards required to evaluate their contemporary legitimacy (Muzakki et al., 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024). Furthermore, the frequent association of compatibility with harmonious marriage requires closer examination because the social desirability of similar backgrounds does not automatically establish the legal or ethical legitimacy of restricting marital choice on the basis of inherited status (Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024; Munir,

2023).

A related conceptual limitation concerns the distinction between formal similarity and substantive equality, since spouses may differ in education, income, occupation, or family background while maintaining relationships characterized by reciprocal respect and equitable responsibility (Mubarok & Hermanto, 2023; Karimullah et al., 2023). Accordingly, the research gap addressed in this article is not the complete absence of studies on kafa'ah or its reinterpretation, but the need for a more explicit analytical framework connecting classical doctrinal reasoning with gender justice and operational criteria for evaluating marital compatibility (Surya et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024).

In response to this gap, the present study proposes an integrated framework of gender-just marital compatibility that critically re-examines classical kafa'ah through the combined perspectives of comparative Islamic jurisprudence, maqāṣid al-sharī'ah, and substantive gender justice, building upon recent scholarship concerning legal pluralism, family welfare, and feminist interpretations of Islamic law (Munir, 2023; Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024). Rather than regarding marital compatibility as a fixed collection of inherited social qualifications, the proposed framework treats kafa'ah as a normative concept whose specific criteria must be evaluated according to their religious justification, practical consequences, and consistency with the ethical objectives of marriage (Muzakki et al., 2024; Surya et al., 2024).

The first dimension of this framework involves doctrinal classification, which distinguishes religious and ethical considerations from social-status criteria whose interpretation may depend on particular historical and cultural contexts (Muzakki et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024). The second dimension introduces a gender-symmetry assessment that examines whether compatibility standards protect both prospective spouses equally, recognize their autonomous consent, and avoid privileging either party through unequal assumptions about marital authority or social worth (Karimullah et al., 2024; Mubarok & Hermanto, 2023).

The third dimension employs a maqāṣid-based evaluation to determine whether the application of compatibility criteria advances justice, preserves human dignity, protects family welfare, and reduces preventable harm within marital relationships (Mufti, 2024; Surya et al., 2024). The fourth dimension addresses contextual applicability by evaluating whether compatibility is better expressed through reciprocal commitments, shared ethical expectations, and negotiated responsibilities rather than rigid similarities in lineage, occupation, or economic position (Karimullah et al., 2023; Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024). Through these dimensions, the study proposes a conceptual shift from status-oriented marital equivalence toward reciprocal marital compatibility without assuming that differences in social background necessarily undermine the stability or legitimacy of marriage (Munir, 2023; Mubarok & Hermanto, 2023).

Its proposed contribution therefore lies not merely in advocating a more inclusive understanding of kafa'ah, but in developing identifiable analytical criteria through which classical legal interpretations can be examined, compared, and normatively reassessed (Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024). In this respect, the study seeks to offer a structured conceptual model that can inform further

doctrinal research, comparative investigations of Muslim family law, and future empirical evaluations of compatibility practices across different Muslim communities (Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024; Muawan & Sudin, 2023).

Against this background, the present study aims to critically investigate the relationship between classical Islamic interpretations of kafa'ah and contemporary principles of gender equality, while developing a contextually relevant reinterpretation of marital compatibility grounded in maqāṣid al-sharī'ah and the ethical requirements of marital justice (Muzakki et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024). The study is guided by the understanding that classical Islamic legal doctrines must be examined within their historical and jurisprudential contexts before their contemporary implications can be adequately assessed (Muzakki et al., 2024; Munir, 2023). It consequently adopts a qualitative library-based approach, combining comparative doctrinal legal analysis with critical conceptual analysis to examine differences among classical jurisprudential interpretations and assess their relevance to contemporary Muslim family relationships (Surya et al., 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024).

The analysis concentrates on the normative foundations of kafa'ah, the possible implications of particular compatibility criteria for women's autonomy and marital equality, and the capacity of purposive Islamic legal reasoning to support a more reciprocal understanding of marital responsibilities (Mufti, 2024; Mubarok & Hermanto, 2023). Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (RQ1) How does the classical Islamic concept of kafa'ah relate to gender equality and justice in marriage? and (RQ2) How can kafa'ah be reinterpreted through maqāṣid al-sharī'ah and gender justice to meet the needs of contemporary Muslim societies? These questions are formulated in response to the intersection between classical doctrinal interpretations, continuing social practices of marital compatibility, and contemporary demands for equality within Islamic family law (Ismail et al., 2024; Mufti, 2024; Karimullah et al., 2024).

The first question directs the investigation toward identifying the doctrinal foundations and possible gender asymmetries of classical kafa'ah, whereas the second guides the development of an alternative framework based on ethical compatibility, reciprocal responsibility, and substantive marital justice (Muzakki et al., 2024; Mubarok & Hermanto, 2023; Mufti, 2024). By connecting doctrinal analysis with normative reconstruction, the study seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions of Islamic family law reform without dismissing the religious and jurisprudential significance of classical legal scholarship (Munir, 2023; Karimullah et al., 2024).

Ultimately, its intended contribution is to demonstrate how the ethical foundations of kafa'ah can be reassessed in ways that respect Islamic legal reasoning while supporting equality, dignity, mutual consent, and sustainable marital relationships in diverse contemporary Muslim societies (Mufti, 2024; Mohd Kusrin et al., 2024).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach integrating an integrative literature review, doctrinal legal analysis, and critical conceptual interpretation to

examine the relationship between the classical Islamic concept of *kafa'ah*, gender equality, and marital justice in contemporary Muslim societies. The research adopts an interpretive-critical orientation that examines Islamic legal doctrines through their textual foundations, jurisprudential reasoning, historical contexts, and contemporary normative implications (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019). An integrative literature review is appropriate because it facilitates the critical evaluation and synthesis of diverse scholarly perspectives to develop a theoretically grounded interpretation rather than merely summarize existing research (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2005). The unit of analysis comprises classical jurisprudential formulations of marital compatibility and their relationship with contemporary principles of gender justice, marital autonomy, reciprocal responsibilities, and family welfare. Accordingly, the research addresses two interconnected questions: how classical interpretations of *kafa'ah* relate to equality and justice in marriage, and how the doctrine may be reconstructed through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and gender-sensitive Islamic legal reasoning.

Data are collected through structured documentary research involving classical Islamic jurisprudential texts, relevant legal documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly monographs addressing marital compatibility, Islamic family law, and gender justice. The literature search is designed to utilize Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and other relevant academic databases, employing Boolean combinations of keywords such as "kafa'ah," "marital compatibility," "Islamic marriage law," "gender equality," "gender justice," and "maqasid al-shariah." Contemporary scholarship published between January 2016 and October 2026 is prioritized, while earlier foundational studies and classical legal sources remain eligible when necessary for historical and doctrinal analysis. Sources are selected purposively based on thematic relevance, scholarly credibility, identifiable provenance, and substantive contributions to the research questions. The selection process involves title and abstract screening, full-text assessment, and citation tracking, with relevant bibliographic information and analytical characteristics documented in a structured extraction matrix. Search procedures and selection decisions are recorded to strengthen transparency, drawing selectively on established literature review reporting principles without presenting the study as a completed systematic review (Snyder, 2019; Page et al., 2021).

The collected materials are analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis, comparative doctrinal interpretation, and critical conceptual synthesis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell et al. (2017), the analytical process involves familiarization with the literature, identification of relevant concepts, thematic coding, examination of jurisprudential disagreements, refinement of analytical categories, and conceptual synthesis. Particular attention is given to religious compatibility, lineage, socioeconomic standing, marital consent, gender hierarchy, reciprocal obligations, human dignity, and substantive justice. Classical juristic positions are comparatively examined to distinguish their scriptural foundations, interpretive assumptions, and implications for the distribution of matrimonial rights and responsibilities. Subsequently, the identified themes are evaluated

through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and gender justice to assess whether particular interpretations of *kafa'ah* promote mutual consent, nondiscrimination, equitable responsibilities, and family welfare (Bowen, 2009; Torraco, 2005). Analytical credibility is strengthened through comparison of contrasting interpretations, documentation of analytical decisions, and consistency between primary legal sources, scholarly arguments, and conceptual conclusions (Nowell et al., 2017). The resulting synthesis develops a normative-conceptual framework for reconstructing *kafa'ah* as a contextually interpretable principle of marital compatibility while distinguishing established jurisprudential doctrines from contemporary scholarly interpretations and the study's proposed theoretical contribution.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Classical Kafa'ah Doctrine, Gender Equality, and Marital Justice

The findings indicate that the classical Islamic concept of *kafa'ah* constitutes a complex jurisprudential construction concerning marital suitability, encompassing religious commitment, moral character, lineage, occupation, socioeconomic standing, and financial circumstances. Historically, the doctrine developed as a mechanism intended to support marital stability, protect family interests, and minimize potential conflicts arising from differences in the social backgrounds of prospective spouses. Nevertheless, the legal significance and criteria of *kafa'ah* have never been entirely uniform across Islamic jurisprudential traditions. Differences among the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali schools demonstrate that marital compatibility represents an area of juristic interpretation shaped by textual reasoning, legal methodologies, and historically situated social expectations rather than a single universally accepted legal formula (Sholahuddin et al., 2025).

The diversity of classical interpretations reveals an important distinction between religiously grounded compatibility and socially constructed criteria of marital suitability. Religious commitment and moral conduct occupy significant positions within Islamic discussions of marital relationships, while lineage, occupational background, wealth, and family prestige have received varying degrees of recognition among jurists. Hanafi jurisprudence developed relatively extensive discussions concerning social and occupational compatibility, whereas Maliki jurisprudence generally emphasized religious and moral considerations. Shafi'i and Hanbali jurists also incorporated social qualifications into their discussions, although their classifications and legal consequences differed. These variations suggest that particular compatibility criteria cannot automatically be regarded as universally binding religious requirements. Rather, they reflect the interaction between normative legal reasoning and the social environments in which jurisprudential doctrines were formulated (Sholahuddin et al., 2025; Manjo et al., 2025).

The historical development of *kafa'ah* must therefore be examined through the relationship between its protective purposes and the social hierarchies embedded in certain classical formulations. Within traditional societies, kinship networks, economic security, and family reputation often influenced matrimonial arrangements. Compatibility considerations could consequently function as

protective mechanisms designed to prevent relationships perceived as socially or materially disadvantageous. However, the existence of a protective rationale does not necessarily establish that every application of the doctrine produces equitable consequences. When compatibility assessments prioritize inherited social standing, family prestige, or the authority of guardians over the informed preferences of prospective spouses, the doctrine may reproduce unequal relationships rather than promote substantive marital protection (Rahman et al., 2025; Putra et al., 2025).

This tension becomes particularly significant when *kafa'ah* is applied asymmetrically. Certain classical formulations primarily assess the suitability of a prospective husband in relation to the woman and her family, while the woman's independent capacity to evaluate the prospective marriage may receive comparatively limited attention. Although such formulations were sometimes intended to protect women against unfavorable matrimonial arrangements, their application could privilege familial authority and social reputation over individual choice. The resulting normative question concerns whether compatibility strengthens women's legal agency or permits restrictions that exceed legitimate protective objectives. Contemporary scholarship on Islamic family law demonstrates that legal arrangements justified through family welfare may coexist with unequal distributions of authority and institutional practices that constrain women's matrimonial autonomy (Rahman et al., 2025; Wirastri & van Huis, 2024).

A gender-sensitive interpretation must accordingly distinguish between the protection of matrimonial interests and the reproduction of gender-based or status-based hierarchy. Gender equality does not require prospective spouses to possess identical educational qualifications, occupations, financial resources, or family backgrounds. Rather, it requires recognition of equal human dignity, meaningful participation in marital decisions, and protection against unjustified discrimination. Within this understanding, compatibility may remain relevant when it concerns mutual ethical commitments, responsible conduct, constructive communication, and the willingness to fulfill matrimonial obligations. However, compatibility becomes normatively problematic when inherited status, ethnicity, lineage, or economic differences are treated as conclusive indicators of unequal human worth or automatic grounds for restricting marriage (Shiddieqy et al., 2025; Karimullah, 2026).

The distinction between equality and compatibility is essential because the two concepts address different normative questions. Equality concerns the legal and moral standing of prospective spouses, whereas compatibility concerns the practical and ethical considerations relevant to their intended relationship. Consequently, differences in socioeconomic background do not necessarily undermine equality, just as similarities in social status do not guarantee marital justice. Two individuals may possess comparable financial resources or educational achievements while maintaining unequal expectations concerning household authority, personal autonomy, or reciprocal responsibilities. Conversely, spouses from different socioeconomic backgrounds may establish relationships characterized by informed consent, mutual respect, and equitable cooperation. This distinction challenges interpretations that treat social

equivalence as an adequate substitute for substantive matrimonial justice.

The relationship between *kafa'ah* and gender equality also requires careful consideration of consent. Formal recognition of a prospective spouse's consent may provide insufficient protection when family pressure, economic dependency, or restrictive social expectations undermine meaningful freedom of choice. Compatibility assessments conducted primarily by guardians or family members can become problematic when their conclusions are imposed without adequate consideration of the individuals directly entering the marriage. A protective understanding of *kafa'ah* should therefore support informed matrimonial decisions while ensuring that familial involvement does not unjustifiably displace the legal agency of prospective spouses. This approach does not require eliminating the role of families in marital deliberation, but it demands a distinction between supportive participation and coercive authority (Rahman et al., 2025; Wirastri & van Huis, 2024).

Contemporary Indonesian marriage law provides an important context for examining the relationship between classical compatibility doctrine and modern legal regulation. The interaction between Islamic jurisprudence, the Marriage Law, and the Compilation of Islamic Law illustrates how matrimonial norms are interpreted through both religious and statutory frameworks. Classical distinctions concerning social standing and occupational prestige do not automatically constitute independent legal requirements for the validity of marriage. Indeed, Article 61 of the Compilation of Islamic Law limits the use of *kafa'ah* as a ground for preventing marriage, except in relation to religious difference. This statutory orientation demonstrates the importance of distinguishing ethical considerations concerning partner suitability from legally enforceable conditions governing matrimonial validity.

Nevertheless, statutory reform does not automatically eliminate the influence of traditional compatibility expectations. Educational attainment, employment, financial stability, family reputation, and social background may continue to shape marriage decisions within Muslim communities. Wirastri and van Huis (2024) demonstrate the continuing interaction between Indonesian marriage law, judicial reform, and established religious interpretations, while Putra et al. (2025) address the relevance of contemporary social considerations in matrimonial practices. These developments indicate that the transformation of legal norms and the transformation of social expectations do not necessarily occur simultaneously. Consequently, a critical interpretation of *kafa'ah* must examine both its formal legal status and its continuing social significance.

From a broader normative perspective, the relationship between classical *kafa'ah* and marital justice cannot be reduced to the assumption that the doctrine is inherently discriminatory or automatically compatible with gender equality. Its implications depend on the compatibility criteria being applied, the authority determining their significance, and the consequences for the rights and choices of prospective spouses. Religious integrity, moral responsibility, and realistic preparedness for marriage may constitute legitimate considerations when evaluated through reciprocal and nondiscriminatory principles. Conversely, inherited social prestige and rigid status classifications become problematic when

they impose disproportionate restrictions or reproduce unequal assumptions concerning human dignity (Sholahuddin et al., 2025; Shiddieqy et al., 2025).

This analysis produces an important conceptual distinction between protective compatibility and hierarchical compatibility. Protective compatibility refers to considerations that support informed choice, mutual responsibility, ethical conduct, and sustainable marital relationships. Hierarchical compatibility refers to interpretations that prioritize inherited status or unequal authority without demonstrating a sufficiently justified relationship to legitimate matrimonial interests. These categories are proposed analytical constructs derived from the present synthesis rather than classifications universally adopted by classical jurists. Their significance lies in establishing criteria through which the normative consequences of different compatibility expectations can be evaluated.

The central finding is therefore that classical *kafaʾah* contains both protective aspirations and historically conditioned forms of social differentiation. Preserving its constructive purposes does not necessarily require maintaining every social classification developed within classical jurisprudence. At the same time, critically examining these classifications does not justify disregarding authoritative legal sources or the diversity of established juristic methodologies. A defensible contemporary interpretation must distinguish enduring ethical objectives from historically contingent applications and evaluate whether particular compatibility criteria strengthen or diminish meaningful matrimonial choice. This conclusion establishes the theoretical basis for reconstructing *kafaʾah* through *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* and substantive gender justice.

Reinterpreting Kafa'ah through Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah and Gender Justice

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the contemporary reconstruction of *kafaʾah* requires a transition from predominantly status-oriented compatibility toward a more reciprocal and ethically grounded understanding of marital suitability. Such reconstruction does not imply the complete abandonment of classical jurisprudential reasoning. Rather, it requires a critical evaluation of whether particular interpretations continue to fulfill the legitimate objectives of Islamic marriage without imposing unjustified restrictions on dignity, autonomy, and reciprocal responsibilities. Within this framework, *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* and substantive gender justice provide complementary normative perspectives for reconsidering the relationship between marital compatibility, individual rights, and family welfare.

Maqāṣid al-sharīʿah offers an evaluative framework through which the objectives and consequences of legal interpretations can be examined. The classical objectives concerning the protection of religion (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), intellect (*ḥifẓ al-ʿaql*), lineage (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), and property (*ḥifẓ al-māl*) provide a normative foundation for assessing whether matrimonial arrangements contribute to human welfare and the legitimate purposes of marriage. Contemporary discussions of Islamic legal reform also emphasize justice, dignity, and the prevention of harm, although the relationship between these principles and classical formulations of *maqāṣid* remains subject to scholarly interpretation. Accordingly, the application of *maqāṣid* to *kafaʾah* requires transparent legal reasoning rather than treating the objectives of Islamic law as an unrestricted justification for preferred contemporary outcomes (Busriyanti et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2026).

Within a *maqāṣid*-oriented interpretation, religious compatibility may be associated with the protection of religion insofar as it encourages ethical commitment, mutual respect, and

responsible marital conduct. Protection of life directs attention to physical safety, psychological security, and the prevention of harm within marital relationships. Protection of intellect emphasizes informed consent, rational deliberation, and the capacity of prospective spouses to participate meaningfully in matrimonial decisions. Protection of lineage concerns responsible family formation and the welfare of future generations, while protection of property highlights financial integrity, responsible economic planning, and the safeguarding of individual entitlements. These relationships represent a proposed conceptual application of *maqāṣid* rather than a definitive classification uniformly established within classical compatibility doctrine (Busriyanti et al., 2025; Roslaili et al., 2021).

The significance of this interpretation lies in shifting the evaluative focus from inherited characteristics toward the interests that matrimonial compatibility is intended to protect. Lineage, occupation, educational qualifications, and wealth may remain relevant to personal preferences or practical discussions concerning marital preparedness. Nevertheless, their relevance should not automatically confer superior moral standing or determine legal suitability independently of the prospective spouses' rights and circumstances. A *maqāṣid*-oriented assessment instead asks whether a particular criterion has a defensible relationship with marital welfare, whether its application respects human dignity, and whether its protective objective can be achieved without imposing disproportionate restrictions.

This interpretation must remain grounded in recognized principles of Islamic legal reasoning. The use of *maqāṣid* cannot independently override explicit legal requirements or transform every desirable social outcome into an authoritative religious ruling. The reconstruction of *kafa'ah* therefore requires distinguishing scriptural foundations from juristic interpretations, identifying the historical assumptions underlying different compatibility criteria, and evaluating their continuing normative relevance. Such an approach permits reconsideration of historically conditioned social distinctions while preserving methodological accountability to Islamic legal sources. Contemporary research on family-oriented objectives of Islamic law similarly emphasizes the importance of relating legal reform to dignity, protection, and family welfare without disregarding established normative foundations (Busriyanti et al., 2025; Roslaili et al., 2021).

Integrating gender justice into this process further requires transforming *kafa'ah* from an asymmetrical assessment of social suitability into a principle of reciprocal matrimonial responsibility. Under this understanding, both prospective spouses possess equal moral worth and should participate meaningfully in determining the suitability of their intended marriage. Compatibility is no longer understood primarily as correspondence between inherited family characteristics, but as a shared assessment of ethical commitment, informed consent, personal integrity, mutual respect, and preparedness to fulfill marital obligations. This transformation does not eliminate religious considerations or practical economic concerns. Instead, it distinguishes legitimate matrimonial deliberation from discriminatory restrictions based exclusively on social status or gender (Shiddieqy et al., 2025; Wirastri & van Huis, 2024).

The distinction between formal equality and substantive justice is particularly important in evaluating this reconstruction. Formal equality concerns the recognition of individuals as equal bearers of legal rights, while substantive justice examines whether social and institutional conditions permit those rights to be exercised meaningfully. In marital compatibility assessments, the formal recognition of consent may remain inadequate when prospective spouses experience coercive family expectations, economic dependency, or unequal access to relevant information. Consequently, a gender-just understanding of *kafa'ah* requires examining whether individuals can express preferences, decline unsuitable arrangements, and participate in marital decisions without unjustified

pressure. Research concerning contemporary Muslim family-law reform demonstrates the continuing significance of consent, institutional protection, and the relationship between normative equality and practical legal agency (Abdullah et al., 2026; Rahman et al., 2025).
Reciprocity also requires reconsidering the relationship between compatibility and matrimonial responsibilities. Traditional discussions frequently emphasize whether a prospective husband possesses sufficient qualifications to be considered suitable for a particular woman or family. A reciprocal interpretation broadens this inquiry by recognizing that both prospective spouses have legitimate interests in evaluating each other's ethical conduct, expectations, and readiness for marriage. Financial responsibility may remain relevant to household planning, but differences in income should not independently establish personal superiority. Similarly, educational differences may require communication and negotiation without necessarily constituting grounds for declaring a marriage ethically unsuitable. Compatibility should therefore be assessed through the prospective spouses' capacity for cooperation rather than the assumption that equivalent social characteristics necessarily produce harmonious relationships.
The contemporary relevance of this approach becomes increasingly apparent amid changes in education, employment, social mobility, and marital expectations. Women's expanding participation in professional and economic activities challenges interpretations that associate marital suitability exclusively with fixed socioeconomic roles. Cross-cultural relationships and changing household arrangements similarly demonstrate that compatibility cannot be adequately understood through rigid social classifications. Nevertheless, these developments do not imply that practical differences between prospective spouses are irrelevant. Economic expectations, family responsibilities, cultural values, and educational backgrounds may influence marital decision-making, but their significance must be evaluated contextually rather than transformed into universally binding criteria (Putra et al., 2025; Sholahuddin et al., 2025).
A contextual interpretation must also account for legal pluralism within contemporary Muslim societies. Islamic matrimonial norms operate through different combinations of classical jurisprudence, national legislation, customary expectations, and judicial institutions. The relationship between religious interpretation and state regulation therefore varies across jurisdictions. Indonesian marriage law illustrates how statutory frameworks can regulate matrimonial validity while traditional compatibility expectations continue to shape family practices. Other Muslim legal contexts demonstrate different approaches to reconciling religious authority, personal autonomy, and gender-related legal reform. These variations reinforce the importance of distinguishing doctrinal interpretation from legal enforceability and social implementation (Wirastri & van Huis, 2024; Busriyanti et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2026).
Against this background, the study proposes a conceptual model termed **Maqāṣid-Based Reciprocal Kafa'ah (MBRK)**. The model integrates three interrelated dimensions: ethical compatibility, reciprocal gender justice, and contextual family welfare. These dimensions are intended to provide a structured basis for evaluating matrimonial suitability while distinguishing legitimate protective considerations from historically contingent social hierarchies. MBRK is not proposed as a new legal pillar of marriage or an additional universally binding condition of matrimonial validity. Rather, it constitutes a normative-conceptual framework for assessing how the purposes of classical *kafa'ah* may be retained and reformulated within contemporary Islamic legal reasoning.
Ethical compatibility emphasizes religious integrity, moral responsibility, trustworthiness, and respect for the dignity of prospective spouses. Its central concern is whether the values and conduct of individuals provide a reasonable foundation for responsible marital relationships. This dimension preserves the relevance of religious and moral considerations while rejecting the assumption that inherited social characteristics

necessarily determine personal virtue. Ethical compatibility therefore prioritizes substantive conduct and reciprocal responsibility rather than treating social reputation as a sufficient indicator of matrimonial suitability.

Reciprocal gender justice concerns meaningful consent, nondiscrimination, equal human dignity, and the participation of both prospective spouses in marital decision-making. It recognizes that the protection of matrimonial interests must be evaluated according to whether individuals possess meaningful opportunities to exercise their rights. Under this dimension, compatibility cannot be considered fully protective when assessments are imposed through coercion or justified through unequal assumptions about moral worth. The emphasis on reciprocity does not require identical obligations in every circumstance, but it demands that differences in responsibilities possess defensible normative foundations and do not undermine the legal personality of either spouse.

Contextual family welfare concerns the practical conditions that may support responsible and sustainable marital relationships. These include constructive communication, realistic economic planning, cooperation in household responsibilities, conflict management, and responsiveness to changing family circumstances. This dimension recognizes that compatibility cannot be established exclusively through abstract legal categories because marital relationships develop within particular socioeconomic and cultural environments. However, contextual considerations should remain subject to critical evaluation so that practical differences do not become instruments for legitimizing discrimination or inherited hierarchy.

The integration of these three dimensions provides a conceptual transition from classical compatibility criteria toward a more relational understanding of matrimonial suitability. Whereas conventional formulations may emphasize the correspondence of social characteristics, MBRK examines the relationship between ethical commitments, meaningful choice, and the practical responsibilities associated with marriage. Its normative foundation rests on the assumption that the legitimate purpose of compatibility is to support responsible marital formation rather than preserve social distinctions for their own sake. This proposed model is informed by contemporary scholarship emphasizing family dignity, welfare, and gender-sensitive Islamic legal interpretation (Busriyanti et al., 2025; Shiddieqy et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2026).

The model also introduces an analytical distinction between permissible considerations and unjustified restrictions. A prospective spouse may reasonably consider religious commitment, financial preparedness, educational expectations, or cultural compatibility when deciding whether to marry. However, the relevance of such considerations to personal choice does not necessarily justify transforming them into compulsory legal barriers. MBRK therefore distinguishes individual matrimonial preferences, communal expectations, and enforceable legal requirements. This distinction is particularly important for preventing social conventions from acquiring an unwarranted status as universal religious obligations.

From a theoretical perspective, the principal contribution of MBRK lies in combining jurisprudential legitimacy with substantive gender justice and contextual family welfare. Existing discussions frequently examine *kafa'ah* either as a classical legal doctrine or as an institution requiring reform in response to contemporary equality concerns. The framework proposed here seeks to connect these perspectives through identifiable normative criteria. It maintains that the legitimacy of a compatibility requirement must be evaluated through its legal foundations, its implications for reciprocal rights, and its contribution to legitimate matrimonial interests. Consequently, the proposed reconstruction does not depend on the assumption that classical doctrine and contemporary gender justice are automatically compatible, but establishes a method for critically examining their relationship.

Nevertheless, the framework remains a theoretically derived conceptual proposition rather than an empirically validated model. Its practical application requires further investigation into how prospective spouses understand compatibility, how families and religious authorities influence marital decisions, and how legal institutions respond to disputes involving consent and suitability. Comparative doctrinal research could also assess whether the proposed dimensions remain consistent with different jurisprudential traditions and statutory frameworks. Such investigation would help clarify the boundaries between normative reinterpretation and institutional implementation without assuming that conceptual reform necessarily produces measurable improvements in matrimonial justice.

The proposed model may additionally contribute to Islamic premarital education by encouraging discussions of mutual respect, informed consent, ethical responsibility, and realistic family preparation. Rather than concentrating exclusively on economic position or inherited social characteristics, educational materials could employ the framework to facilitate reflection on the reciprocal responsibilities and practical expectations associated with marriage. These possibilities remain proposed applications that require further evaluation within specific educational and legal contexts.

Overall, the reconstruction developed in this study demonstrates that *kafa'ah* can retain normative relevance when understood as a contextually interpretable principle supporting dignified, equitable, and responsible marriage. Its legitimacy cannot be determined exclusively by the preservation of classical social classifications or by the adoption of contemporary equality discourse without jurisprudential justification. Instead, the proposed Maqāṣid-Based Reciprocal Kafa'ah framework offers an integrated approach through which ethical suitability, reciprocal legal agency, and contextual family welfare can be examined together. This synthesis constitutes the study's principal conceptual contribution to contemporary Islamic family-law scholarship while establishing a foundation for subsequent doctrinal and empirical research.

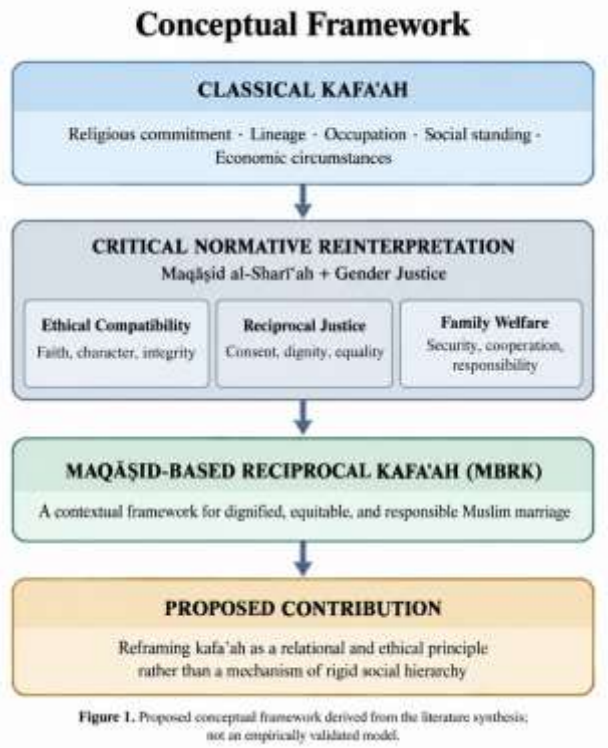


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework derived from the literature synthesis; not an empirically validated model.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the classical Islamic doctrine of *kafa'ah* reflects a diverse jurisprudential understanding of marital compatibility, encompassing religious commitment, moral character, lineage, socioeconomic standing, and financial circumstances. Differences among the classical schools of Islamic jurisprudence demonstrate that compatibility criteria were shaped by both normative legal reasoning and historically situated social conditions. Although *kafa'ah* was intended to promote marital stability and protect family interests, certain status-oriented interpretations may reinforce social hierarchies and unequal gender relations when applied without sufficient consideration of individual dignity, informed consent, and reciprocal marital responsibilities. The relationship between *kafa'ah* and gender equality is therefore neither inherently contradictory nor automatically compatible; it depends on the normative justification, application, and consequences of particular compatibility criteria.

The study further establishes that reinterpretation through *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* and substantive gender justice provides a conceptual basis for reconstructing *kafa'ah* from an emphasis on inherited social equivalence toward reciprocal ethical compatibility. This reconstruction is articulated through the proposed **Maqāṣid-Based Reciprocal Kafa'ah (MBRK)** framework, integrating ethical compatibility, reciprocal gender justice, and contextual family welfare. The framework emphasizes moral integrity, meaningful consent, equal human dignity, mutual responsibility, and practical preparedness for marriage while maintaining the importance of authoritative Islamic legal reasoning. Its principal theoretical contribution lies in distinguishing protective compatibility, which supports responsible marital choice, from hierarchical compatibility, which may perpetuate unjustified social and gender inequalities. Consequently, *kafa'ah* can retain its normative relevance within contemporary Islamic family law without being reduced to rigid classifications of lineage, occupation, wealth, or inherited social status.

The proposed framework offers implications for contemporary Islamic legal interpretation and premarital education by encouraging compatibility assessments grounded in ethical responsibility, nondiscrimination, and informed decision-making. Nevertheless, as a normative-conceptual study based on documentary analysis, the research does not establish the empirical effectiveness of the MBRK framework or its uniform applicability across different legal and cultural contexts. Future research should examine its doctrinal compatibility with diverse Islamic legal traditions and evaluate its practical relevance through empirical investigations involving prospective spouses, families, religious authorities, and matrimonial institutions. Such inquiry is necessary to determine whether the proposed reconstruction can contribute to more equitable and sustainable marital relationships while preserving the normative integrity of Islamic family law.

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