

on her dead husband's funeral pyre). Each of the Sikh Gurus contributed to the enhancement of equality for women.

During the time of the third Guru, Guru Amar Das Ji, Sikh dharma had established 22 centres around the country. Four of the leaders at these centres were women. This makes Sikh dharma the only religion to have the equivalent of four women Bishops in the fifteenth century. In addition to this the third Guru sent over one hundred missionaries to various parts of India. Just under half of these individuals were women.

The Sikh Gurus gave women and men equal opportunities to excel in all spheres of life. As a result, Sikh history is riddled with famous women providing leadership in military campaigns, human rights demonstrations, religious functions and politics. Some examples include Mai Bhag Kaur (military general), Bibi Sahib Kaur (military strategist), Sardarni Dharam Kaur (protector of Akalgarh) and Bibi Prem Kaur (the Sikh Florence Nightingale). There is no special position reserved for a man in Sikh dharma. The highest authority is given to the Panj Pyare (5 beloved ones) and this can consist of men and women.

Marriage in Sikh dharma

Marriage is considered an integral part of the spiritual journey to realise God. The Guru reveals,

"They are not said to be husband and wife who merely sit together, rather they alone are husband and wife who have one soul in two bodies" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p.788).

In Sikh dharma the marriage ceremony is referred to as the Anand Karaj. It is not a legal contract. Instead it is the uniting of two souls, which is an important step on the path of spirituality. Sikh dharma rejects the idea of renunciation and celibacy as being religiously necessary. Everything can be achieved in family life. The relationship between a man and a woman is described by the Sikh Scholar Bhai Gurdas,

"woman is one half of the complete personality of man, and is entitled to share secular and spiritual knowledge equally" (Bhai Gurdas Vaaran, Vaar 5, Pauri 16:59)

A married couple should therefore live together as equals. God has solely given women, the ability to give birth. However it is the duty of both husband and wife to share the responsibilities of rearing children. All other family duties and commitments should also be shared equally.

Conclusion

Our world still contains much sexism. We must all strive for the complete emancipation of women, which can be achieved if we all try to practice equality, as exemplified by the Great Sikh Gurus.

Empowerment Of Women By World Religions



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Sikh Dharma

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Background

We live in a world dominated by men. Women have always been subservient to men in some form whether that be politically, socially, economically or spiritually. So what has been the contribution of the major world religions in establishing equality between men and women?

Hindu dharma

Hindu society is divided into castes. The high caste men (Brahmins) have always had the most power whereas the sudras (lowest caste) and all women (high and low caste) have traditionally been the ones with the least power and no dignity.

The Manusmriti is an important Hindu text describing Hindu law. With regards to spirituality, it prohibits women from listening to religious scripture (Vedas) and describes them as bad, because they prevent man from becoming God enlightened (because they produce sexual desires in man). In addition to this, it describes a menstruating woman to be impure and certainly in the past, the touch of a menstruating woman would require a high caste male to bathe. Women were barred from owning property and were made to work outside the village and perform its most demeaning tasks, including sweeping, working with leather and removing excrement. Hindu law advised women to remain under the protection of men and never be independent, due to their weak nature. A good wife was also expected to serve even a bad husband as God. The accepted religion of a woman was to give birth to sons: *"Grant the birth of a girl elsewhere. Here grant a son"* (Athara Veda, 3,23).

Hindu society has made significant progress in providing more equality for women, to the extent that even the Prime Minister of India has been a woman, namely Indira Gandhi. However, women in India are still frequent victims of rape and violence. In addition to this, women are still banned from assuming the highest spiritual position in Hinduism called the Shankara-acharya.

Christianity

The position of the Church, until recent times seems to have been influenced by both the Mosaic

Law and by the ideas prevalent a few hundred years ago. In the past the Church has been responsible for not only affirming the inferior status of women, but also depriving women of their legal rights. One of the early Church Fathers named Lecky said, *"Woman is represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance on account of the curses she has brought upon the world...she should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent instrument of the devil."*

With regards to creation, the Bible says that Eve was created from the rib of Adam. Could this imply an inferior status for women? Surely if God is all powerful, He could have created Eve from the same substance with which He created Adam?

In more recent times the question of women priests has caused some controversy. In a few cases, some dissatisfied members of the Church have resorted to accepting Catholicism, which doesn't allow women to function as priests. Modern Christian ideas with regards to the role of women within society have evolved greatly, for the better. Currently, there are adequate facilities for Christian women to grow in all aspects of life.

Islam

The religion of the Muslims provided many benefits for women in all spheres of life including political, social and economic. It is true to say that Islam brought more equality to women. However Islam defines men and women to have different roles. The Holy Quran states, *"Men are the protectors and sustainers of women, because Allah has given the one more [strength] than the other and because they support them from their means"* (Holy Quran, 4:34).

This means that although a woman is allowed to pursue a career, her primary role is to look after her children and perform her duties as a wife. With regards to spirituality, a woman is given the opportunity to develop like any man, however she is not allowed to lead the congregation into prayer. In other words an Imam must always be a man. With respect to law, the testimony of two women in Islam is equal to the testimony of one man. A reason for this is given by Hammuda

Abdul-Ati, Phd who writes, *"... woman as a rule is not so experienced in practical life as man...this is therefore a precautionary measure to guarantee honest dealings between people."*

With regards to marriage, a Muslim man is allowed to have four wives at any one time. This is known as polygamy. But a woman is not allowed to have more than one husband. In addition to this, Muslim men have sexual rights over women and any slave girls they possess. Hadith No. 61 confirms this by stating, *"The messenger of Allah said: when a man calls his wife to satisfy his desire, let her come to him though she is occupied at the oven."*

Buddha dharma

This is a very popular way of life and is extremely diverse. There are many different forms of Buddhism such as Zen, Mahayana, Theravada to name a few.

There are different rules for men and women, which take account of the various differences between a male and a female. Historically Tantric Buddhism did to some extent provide opportunities for women to function in a more equal fashion.

Conclusion so far

The major world religions all provide certain degrees of freedom to women. But it must be noted that none of them provide complete equality.

The Sikh perspective

So what did the Sikh Gurus have to say about equality for women? Well during the time of the first Guru, the situation for women was terrible and Guru Nanak Dev Ji challenged the men of his time, by saying, *"It is by women that we are conceived and from them that we are born. It is with them that we are married. It is women we befriend and it is they who keep the human race going. When one woman dies we seek another. It is with her we become established in society. Why then call her evil who gives birth to great kings? All who live are born of women, none exists without her."* (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p.473).

Guru Nanak Dev Ji challenged the practice of dowry and the practice of Sati (the burning of the widow