

Inequality in Religions: Discrimination against Women in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and Some Salutary Remedies

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Abstract

Discrimination [which of course exists in the following forms: racial discrimination, gender discrimination, residential segregation, victimization, discrimination arising from disability, etc.] is one thing that clearly characterizes human society. During the slave era, in the feudal as well as in this present capitalist society, some sorts of discrimination exist. The works of the famous German philosopher-Karl Marx (1818-83), particularly the *Das Kapital* (Capital) published between 1867 and 1894, exposed discrimination, or rather inequality (class inequality precisely) in human society. In school, in politics, in hospital, in the market and in workplaces people also, consciously and unconsciously, discriminate against each other. But one may ask: is there a form of discrimination within the gamut of religion, within religious institutions, like churches, mosques and temples? Or, does discrimination, gender discrimination precisely, exist in religions? Do women enjoy same religious privileges as their male counterparts? Do they receive any unfair treatments? Are women “second class citizens” in different religious institutions and bodies? To attempt to answer these questions, secondary data would be used, in exposing areas where women particularly suffer discrimination in the religions of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The utmost aim of exposing “religious discrimination” against women is mainly for corrective purpose, as this study provides some feasible remedies to the issue.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Remedies.

Introduction

Very old and important is religion. There is hardly any human society where religion is nonexistent. The universality of religion notwithstanding, Dawes and Maclaurin (2012) acknowledge its complexity and extraordinary diversity. In different societies different forms of religion exist. Some of them include: Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Occultism, Paganism, Shintoism, etc. (Crabtree, 2013). Having stated this, men and women make up almost every single religion in the world. In most religions however, women constitute a substantial number of worshippers. Even outside the boundary of religion women make up half of the total earth population (Worldmeters, 2020). But in spite of this obvious fact women still suffer discrimination in almost every facet of life. Robert Alan notes elaborately:

Even though they make up half of population, women and girls have endured discrimination in most societies for thousands of years. In the past, women were treated as property of their husbands or fathers-they couldn't own land, they couldn't vote or go to school, and were subject to beatings and abuse and could do nothing about it. Over the last hundred years, much progress has been made to gain equal rights for women around the world, but many still live without the rights to which all people are entitled (see Essays, UK, 2020).

Today, like Robert Alan tried to point out, several laws geared towards gender equality exist at local, national and international levels. In the preamble of the United Nations Charter¹ for example, discrimination, gender discrimination inclusive, was condemned. In the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights², and in the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, discrimination and segregation were equally tabooed. Feminists [Ezrat Nashin, Zainah Anwar, Maria Pilar Aquino, etc. for example] also seek an egalitarian society. Zainah Anwar, through the organization: Sisters in Islam, assiduously fights gender inequality by teaching the import of equality through an Islamic framework (see Koehler and Calais-Haase, 2018). All these notwithstanding, gender discrimination still persist in various religious institutions. In fact men, according to Beatrice Alba [in her 2019 article titled *If we Reject Gender Discrimination in Every other Area, Why do we accept it in Religion?*], are believed to be of higher spiritual authority to women. In addition she writes:

...many religions do not allow full ordination of women into the clergy. Some religions disallow women from sitting at the front in their places of worship, and some places of worship refuse entry to women. Religious texts espouse notions of the mental, moral, and

¹In the preamble it is stated unambiguously that the peoples of the UN resolved to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small [see "Charter of the United Nations-Preamble". UN. @ <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/preamble/>]

²Article 1 of the 1948 UDHR states: *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*

spiritual inferiority of women, and religion is used to justify gross forms of gender inequality all around the world.

In support of the above assertion, the following scriptural verses directly and indirectly depict gender discrimination: “I do not allow a woman to teach or assume authority over man” (1 Timothy 2:12, New International Version). “Man has a degree above women” (Quran 98, IFTA). “Woman does not need to perform or follow religious rites or observance on their own, obedience to the husband alone would exalt woman to heaven” (Tripitaka 123, JHA). “Vedic Mantras are not to be recited by woman, as they lack strength and knowledge of Vedic texts, women are impure and represent falsehood” (Manusmriti). It also ought to be noted that in most religions [as well as societies] of the world male children are considered more worthy and valuable than their female counterparts because they carry the family name. In Islamic countries of Iran, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, women are barred from travelling outside their country without a written permission from their husband. But reverse is the case with men (Essays, UK, 2020). On the basis of this therefore, this paper will carefully unveil and explore the patterns and areas where woman are discriminated against in the religions of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam after which feasible solution would be proffered. But before that it is pertinent that, for proper understanding of the topic of the research, we first do justice to the concept of gender discrimination.

Gender Discrimination: A Connotation

Discrimination generally is defined in Black’s Law Dictionary as “a practice that confers privileges on certain class or that denies privileges to a certain class because of race, age, sex, nationality, religion, or handicap or differential treatment, especially a failure to treat all persons equally when no reasonable distinction can be found between those favoured and those not favoured” (see Fasina, 2017:6). Gender discrimination on the other hand, and as contained in Article 1 of the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, means “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field” (see Fasina, 2017:8).

In most societies, as it’s stated earlier, a female child is less valuable to a male child. The kind of feast organized at a male child’s birth is also different from that of the counterpart’s. In Nepal for example, there is a popular saying that a woman eats goat meat if she delivers a baby boy whereas she is given pumpkin to eat if she delivers a baby girl (Pokharel, 2008). In other communities also, especially in Africa, women hardly inherit properties like houses and lands. No wonder people often say, according to Pokharel, “Thank you Lord that I was not born a woman”.

In essence, gender discrimination simply infers prejudiced, biased and unfair treatments women are subjected to, even from birth, for the fact that they are of feminine sex. Obiwuru (2019:88) notes that the prejudiced treatments are predicated on the notion that women are weaker vessels to men and that, according to Bolanle (2018) in Obiwuru (2019:88), women are much concerned about less important and superficial things like fashion and beauty; they also never think critically and deeply.

Gender Discrimination in Christianity

In Christianity, there are arguments by scholars that the religion is devoid of discrimination, discrimination against women precisely. One of such arguments is that out of the two main genders we have, the female ones were the first to acknowledge the holy resurrection of the Messiah-Jesus Christ. According to John's account [John 20: 14-16], Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene after resurrection. In Matthew's gospel [Matthew 28:9], the following women: Mary the Mother of James, Salome and Joanna also saw Jesus first after his resurrection and before revealing Himself even to His apostles/disciples. But no matter how sound the argument may appear, it should be noted that Christianity, which developed out of Judaism in the first century AD, emerged from patriarchal societies that placed men in positions of authority in marriage, society and government. These practices influenced the teachings of Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and some conservative branches of Protestant Christianity, which do not permit women to be ordained as clergy, teach or hold offices of authority over men.

In the Bible, the holy book of the Christians, there are certain facts that portray gender discrimination. Out of the twelve (12) apostles Jesus Christ had, none was a woman. Among the Holy Trinity also, there was and is probably no feminine gender, for what we have is: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Very interestingly, God the Father has a Son but no wife. In the Roman Catholic Church, Andrews (2018) records that out of about two hundred and sixty (260) popes the Church has had, only one³ happened to be a woman.

From the 19th to the late 20th century, Christian feminists who did not believe in women's subordination started to challenge these practices (William Weinrich, 1991, Koessler, 2008). According to Harrison (2007) and Daggars (2001), Christian feminism advances the equality of women and men spiritually, morally, socially and in leadership from a Christian point of view. It challenges the interpretation of scriptures in light of equality of women and men. It

³The Vatican's official records state that all of the more than 260 Catholic popes have been men, but according to a medieval legend, a lady pontiff may have reigned for a brief period in the ninth century. As the story goes, this "Pope Joan" was a young woman who disguised herself as a man and entered into religious training. After distinguishing herself as a scholar, she rose through the church ranks and was elected Pope John VIII in the year 855. She went on to rule for more than two years, her gender always carefully concealed beneath her flowing robes. Her secret was only revealed in 858, when she unexpectedly went into labour during a papal procession. Some accounts allege that she died in childbirth, while others claim her enraged followers dragged her behind a horse and stoned her to death.

focuses on ordination of women and the general treatment of women in church (Anderson 2007). This movement has resulted into most Pentecostal churches and non-Pentecostal churches ordaining women. Feminist scholars in religion advocate for change in the way the Bible is studied and interpreted. They argue that the Bible has been used to silence women hence the need to seriously look at the issue of power, exclusion and domination (Fiorenza, 1997). The realization by Christian feminists that church practices and doctrines assumed to be sex neutral may in fact be male biased led to a more systematic inquiry in Christianity. By the late 1970s and 80s, Christian feminists' theologies had reached Latin America, Asia and Africa (Reuther, 1993). According to McPhillips (1999), Christian feminism advocates for gender equality and equity in Christian churches. Christian feminism seeks to interpret and understand Christianity in terms of equality of women and men as well as how women are treated in church. According to Anderson (2004) there are three elements of the Christian tradition which have troubled feminist theologians: the explicit references to differences in behaviour required of men and women, for example, Paul's injunction to women to remain silent in church, Male imagery, language and symbolism, including a range of practices from the familiar representation of God as father and king to the use of the generic "he" and a sexist picture of the world and of human nature. Feminist theologians have laboured to unearth the injustices and promote equal rights and fair treatment of female in religion.

In 2007, a study to examine the churches' policies, doctrines and practices that would hinder gender equality among five Southern African churches was undertaken. The churches involved in the study were: Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, (ELCSA), Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA), Roman Catholic Church of Southern Africa (RCCSA), Methodist Church of South Africa (MCSA) and the Anglican Church of southern Africa (ACSA). The findings were that in all these churches except for the Roman Catholic Church of Southern Africa, women were accepted into ordained Ministry and theoretically at all levels of leadership but were few in senior positions (Ryan and Thabethe, 2007).

According to the Seventh-day Adventist church policy, "a commissioned minister is authorized by the conference to perform substantially all the religious functions within the scope of the tenets and practices of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for the members in the church or churches to which the minister is assigned and elected as a church elder" (North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2003-2004:463). Women clergy are not allowed to organise a church or preside over the ordination service of local elders and deacons in her church even if she is a sole pastor of that congregation. Chaves (1997) observed that the Adventist church is an example of "loose coupling," which is "produced when an externally generated organizational characteristic is at odds with an internal, pragmatic organizational activity" (p. 5).

A study conducted by Mungaila, S. between 2013 and 2016 entitled '*A Christian Feminist Critique of Pastors' Authority roles: a case study of twelve Pentecostal churches in Lusaka,*

Zambia, revealed that the training pastors undergo plays a major role in how the churches run. The use of *Wife-Husband Leadership Model* makes female pastors vulnerable and less effective. Pastors' religious authority is based on patriarchy and sexism and that female pastors' access to full and equal religious authority remains a struggle.

Gender Discrimination in Buddhism

Buddhism is a leading authority of humanity in India and diaspora. A substance which the patriarch perception of Brahmins had contributed to depreciate. Brahmins believe that women cannot have the same recognition as men, a position which women had lost in domestic subservience to man. As the Manu Smriti states "Matrimony and obedience to the husband are the only means whereby a woman can hope to reach heaven" (in Barua, 2011). Brahmins' teachings permeate all areas throughout a woman's life beyond religion to include culture, social and politics. In the home, church, work and community women are barred from participating in decision-making symposium. Though democracy allows for equal opportunities to competition and resources, woman in Buddha societies face hurdles compared to their counterparts. For example, women involvement in sports, politics, art, medicine and science is still subject to patriarch treatment. In addition, women's achievement and contribution is not equated the same level of recognition as men's.

Gender Discrimination in Hinduism

Gender discrimination in Hindu communities is rather embedded in fatal patterns. Removal of fetuses, premature death, feticides, and the neglect of girls in India is predominately due to Hindu traditional and customary practices. The high number of women missing from the population reflects the discrimination of woman to a point of death (Sadanandan, 2018). Three Hindu traditional patterns that account for the discrimination of woman in the area of gender roles and marriage are: first, the practice of customary inheritance of the Dayabhanga and Mitaskara prefers sons and marginalize girls and widows, and forbids them from inheriting ancestral property, such as land; second, dowry customs make girls burdens to their parents compared to the benefactor sons; third, sons are considered couriers of the family name, bearers of the parent duties, and able to cleanse parents off their evil, to that effect woman are denied privileges of self-development beyond matrimonial education. Hence the woman is subject to discrimination in all forms of public participation and involvement.

Gender Discrimination in Islam

In Islam there has been a rich diversity of women being leaders, and they have profoundly held their place from the early days of Islam, as we can see the politically influential mother of the believers A'ishah(ra) and there had been the Prophet's first wife Khadija-tul-kubra, who was the second Muslim and the first Muslim besides the Prophet himself, who donated a large sum of money to Islam and also operated a huge business (Khadijah, 2020). Prophet himself had taken advice from Umme Salma in the case of hudaibiyah treaty, the hadith

collection history has also been renowned with the contribution of women, even to the era of Spanish Andalusia Emirate to the modern Ottoman state the status of women were never so questionable like today in this modern era, where there has been a movement to restore the orthodox doctrine again in the Islamic world.

In our contemporary world, Muslim women face discrimination in the areas of education, in workplaces, in the type of garment they put on, in politics, and so forth. In areas of education and work, Islamic woman cannot study to a certain standard or work long hours or occupy certain position because they will come home to their husband tired. In addition, Islamic woman's choice on clothing is limited to long robes that can only show her face, as Stacey states that Purdah practices requires woman to wear hijab (Alharafesheh & Iyad, 2016) , to which, failure often leads to discrimination in terms of access to public amenities. Moreover, the association of the hijab with terrorism subjects Islamic woman to further discrimination from people of other religions such as Hindu.

In politics, or rather in the context of women leadership in the strategic position such as in government was and is a controversial issue among the classic and contemporary scholars (Feillard, 2014; Islam, 2014). Some scholars tend to allow women to be leaders in strategic positions, e.g. as President, Prime Minister, Ministers, etc. (Shihab, 1999; 2002; Wadud, 1999); meanwhile some other scholars tend not to allow women to be leaders (Al-Bassam, 1992; Al-Maqdisi, 1985; Al-Qaradhawi, 1994; Al-Siba'y, 1977; Amir Abdat, 2001). The arguments whether woman can be a leader or not is constructed and supported by their understanding and the paradigm background of the scholars. However, if each of the arguments they built is analyzed methodologically (*ushul fiqh*) contextual, then it seems that view is more logical and rational those (*ulama*) who tend to allow women to be leaders with consideration of the benefits and interpretations that will result (Maimun, 2012; Shahnaz, 2014; Eidoo, 2016).

One argument that makes it difficult for women to be leaders in politics is the one in Quran Surah An-Nisa (The Women) 'verse 34. In that verse it is explained that men are more upright over women or prescribe female subordination: *“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient (to Allah and to their husbands), and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard (e.g. their chastity, their husband's property, etc.). As to those women on whose part you see ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next) refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly, if it is useful), but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance). Surely, Allah is Ever Most High, Most Great)* [Quran 4:34]. Interpretation of this verse, Allah has exaggerated some of them (men) over some others (women), and because men have provided a living from their wealth. From this verse arose the doctrine that women are not entitled to be leaders, and those who deserve to be leaders are only men (Mutalib et.al. 2017; Shihab, 2000; Supriyadi et.al. 2019).

Due to the variety of interpretations, so far the issue of women's leadership in Islam is still a contentious topic, but there is not a single concept in the Holy Quran that limits women to become leaders, meaning that women have the right to be leaders (Rohman, 2013; Muqoyyidin, 2013). This is contained in the verse that reads: indeed Allah created man, man and woman to become leaders (Al-Baqarah: 30), in its broad meaning, such as government leaders, educational leaders, family leaders and leaders for themselves.

Corrective Remedies to the Issue

It is widely believed in medicine that after every diagnosis comes the doctor's prescription. Likewise, to eradicate, or rather to effectively address the issue of victimization, segregation, marginalization and discrimination [or whatever it might be called] against women in religion precisely, the following proposed remedies ought to be reviewed and properly implemented:

- ***Banish Patriarch version of Holy Scriptures:*** The greatest failure in the supra religions is in the contradictory versions of translation of their Holy Scriptures, especially on gender roles. Patriarch version and verses of the bible, Quran, Manusmiti and Tripitaka must be replaced with egalitarian versions, so that woman cannot be seen as subordinates to men. For example, the New International version of the bible gives men authority over women because they were the first to be created, and the woman was created for the gratification of the man. Such versions should be replaced with texts that describe woman in instances that equate them to the same privileges as men in areas of politics, economy, culture and societies.
- There is need to mainstream gender in all church activities. Duties and roles must be based on qualifications, abilities, skills that one possesses and not on gender stereotypes.
- There is immediate need to alter or amend the patriarchal Arab culture as the culture, which of course is sectarian, treats women as second class beings, and also influences the way Muslim women generally are treated in other parts of the world.
- The pastoral training curriculum needs to be redesigned to include gender component. An inclusion of Feminist theology will add value to the pastoral training.
- ***Reform traditional norms and customs:*** Change the dowry customs in Hindu, the Purdah practices in Islam, and review the subtle patterns of woman participation in Christian ordination and in Buddhist Sangha to improve woman's life. The reformation of these norms and customs in religions will allow woman equal opportunities in areas of education, politics, culture, and economy, and elevate their status to decision-making position at home, work, community, and society. This will depreciate patterns that sexualize woman as male objects of gratification.
- ***Criminalize patriarch practices:*** There is no denying the fact that men benefit from gender discrimination, and will divert their patriarch norms to subtle pattern to avoid the egalitarian motion, just to hold on to their uncontested privileges. Criminalizing practices and customs that reinforce gender discrimination in religion will proffer a way out for women at home, work, community and church. For example, a man who prevents a

woman to inherit ancestral property in Hinduism must be prosecuted together with the Muslim man who force or divorce his wife because she refuses to wear hijab, shutdown establishments that refuse her entry.

- **Renounce gender terminologies in language and marketing:** Banishing patriarch texts in Holy Scriptures and reforming chauvinist customs is not enough to end gender discrimination. Renouncing terminologies that denote woman as man's possession in language and adverts that sexualize woman and equate them as objects for man gratification will depreciate stereotypes of gender discrimination. As O'Barr states that the display of woman in sexual manner more than it is normal for men in media has reinforced a norm that led to the sexualisation of woman in societies (2006). The reoccurrence of such images about woman in media reinforce religious patriarchy mentally, which eventually leads to discrimination of woman on the basis of their sex. The pronoun 'she' denote something of precious value such as land, car, or gold, which man acquires and own, referring to woman as a 'she' relegate them to possession of man. The exchange of woman for material property during marriage rites equate woman to man's property.

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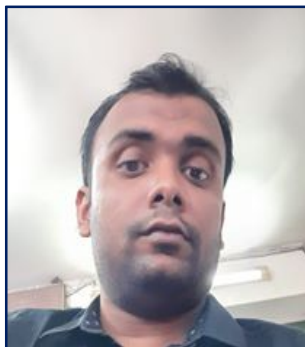
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