

Between Faith and Freedom: Women's Struggles in Religious Traditions

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Abstract - This paper examines how major world religions have contributed to the oppression of women through doctrines, laws and social practices. Focusing on Abrahamic traditions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) and Indian-origin religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism), it explores how religious norms have legitimized women's subordination in family life, religious leadership, education and public roles. At the same time, the paper notes that each tradition contains elements that affirm women's spiritual equality and has generated movements for change. The analysis shows that while legal and social reforms have improved women's status, religiously grounded gender hierarchies continue to shape many women's lives, especially in patriarchal and rural contexts.

Keywords: Religion; Women; Patriarchy; Oppression; Gender roles; Abrahamic Religions; Indian Religions

I. INTRODUCTION

A woman is “an adult female human being.” In many societies, women are considered the weaker or more gentle sex, seen as fragile and taught from an early age to preserve themselves from almost everything. Even though females make up roughly half of the world's population, women and girls have endured discrimination in most societies for thousands of years. In the past, they were often treated as the property of their fathers and husbands: they could not own land, attend school, or vote, and they were subjected to beatings and abuse. Over the years, a considerable amount of progress has been made to gain equal rights for women around the world, but many still live without basic rights that should be guaranteed to everyone.

In today's world, women have demonstrated that they are equal to men and can do the same amount of work, and sometimes even more. However, the oppression of women persists not only in religious contexts but also in culture, the workplace, sports, and politics. In simple terms, a woman often has to work extremely hard to gain the position she deserves.

This paper argues that religion has played a major role in legitimizing and reinforcing the oppression of women, even as some religious traditions also offer resources for women's empowerment. Religion has been around for thousands of years. When many major religions first developed, societies were technologically less advanced and deeply patriarchal, men were considered a superior gender, and women were not allowed to go anywhere without male guidance. For their basic needs they had to depend on men or seek “permission” from them.

In some parts of the world today, men still hold authority over women and female children, even though there may be laws intended to stop this inequality. Many world religions maintain male social dominance within their societal structures. Research on the development of individual religions indicates a negative shift in women's social status with the emergence and institutionalization of “advanced” religions. Religious norms and prejudices often reflect patriarchal values that characterize wider societies. The role of God or creator is usually presented as male, and women are primarily valued as mothers, especially as mothers of sons. Women's place is often seen as within the household, with limited participation in religious ceremonies or public positions, though in some religions women have acquired significant status and authority.

Abrahamic Religions

Christianity

Christianity is the world's largest religion, with more than two billion followers, and is practiced in nearly every nation. It originated in the land of Israel and was initially a movement within Judaism, later developing primarily in the West to become the largest and one of the youngest world religions. In general, Christians believe in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the divine and truly human incarnate Son of God who is the savior of humanity. Scholars believe

that Jesus was born between 4 and 7 B.C. in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth of Galilee. His contemporaries regarded him as the son of Joseph and Mary, a carpenter, while the Gospels of Matthew and Luke state that he was born of a virgin.

Impact of Christianity on Women

In its early years, Christianity taught spiritual unity at a minimum, which had the potential to alleviate the harshness of Roman law under which women were considered non-citizens with no legal rights. Oppression was still pervasive: while men's adultery was often assumed or overlooked, women could be stoned to death for even looking at a man. The apostle Paul wrote, "Be subject to one another in fear of Christ" (Ephesians 5:21), and women did gain some status in Christian communities, filling key roles within the church.

Church teachings often profess equality of women and men but promote the notion of complementarity, assigning fixed roles to each, with women usually in passive and subservient positions. Fr. Shaji George Kochuthara of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate points out that procreation is frequently treated as the center of marriage, while love, equality, respect, mutuality, and consent are ignored. Church leadership has often remained silent on domestic violence and sexual harassment but has condemned abortion and contraceptives and glorified fidelity and motherhood regardless of circumstances.

Catholic women are governed by the Code of Canon Law, which has historically discriminated against them and excluded them from many church offices, denying them basic rights within the institution. A patriarchal form of Christianity developed that limited women's freedom in the church and did not allow them to hold the same positions as men, such as preachers, deacons, and bishops. These exclusions were justified by citing biblical passages, including those interpreted as calling for women not to teach or preach in public assemblies because this would constitute authority over men. However, in some periods of Christian history, women have played significant authoritative roles, and women's ordination has increased in some denominations since the early 20th century, though it remains controversial.

Many voices within Christianity profess equality for all and claim that women and men are treated equally. In contrast to Greek, Roman, and some Jewish cultural views that saw women as possessions, Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament as showing love and respect for women. Women such as Mary Magdalene, who supported Jesus and his ministry and played a major role in the early church, provide a glimpse of how important women are in Christianity, even if later institutions often marginalized them.

Judaism

Judaism is a monotheistic religion, believing in one God. It is also an ethnic and cultural identity, and individuals may identify with Judaism primarily through cultural characteristics. Jewish communities differ in belief, practice, politics, geography, language, and autonomy. Jews have lived in many different countries over many centuries, and in 1948 the modern State of Israel was established, allowing Jews to live an independent national life spiritually, religiously, and politically.

Impact of Judaism On Women

The Hebrew Bible and the Oral Law (the corpus of rabbinic literature) both mention the roles of women and include religious laws on how to treat women differently in various circumstances. In traditional Judaism, gender has a bearing on the matrilineal side: Jewishness is passed down through the mother, although the father's name is used to describe sons and daughters in the Torah. In Jewish tradition, a covenant was made between the people of Israel and the God of Abraham at Mount Sinai; the Torah relates that both Jewish men and women were present, but the obligation to act on the covenant was primarily placed on men, who were expected to ensure that members of their household met their religious requirements.

Many laws historically restricted women's rights. Practices such as levirate marriage and *halitza*, now rarely applied, could deny widows the right to remarry freely and did not always allow them to choose whom they married. Laws concerning female virginity were stricter than those for men, and adultery rules generally punished women more harshly, while men were sometimes given

opportunities to justify their actions, similar to patterns in Christianity.

Judaism prescribes modesty for both men and women, but greater pressure is placed on women regarding dress, especially in Orthodox communities, where women may wear skirts rather than trousers and married women cover their heads.

Islam

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are major monotheistic faiths that share certain holy sites, such as Jerusalem, and collectively trace their heritage to Abraham. For example, Christians regard Abraham as the father of faith, Muslims honor him as a prophet, and Jews view their lineage as connected to him. Islam means “surrender” or “submission” and began with the Prophet Muhammad. The central statement of faith is that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger. Muslims believe they are following the same basic tradition as earlier prophets such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jesus, and Moses.

Impact of Islam on Women

Islamic faith states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God and are allowed to fulfill the same fundamental religious obligations. In early Islamic history, women were allowed to pray with men, participate in commercial interactions, and play roles in education and public life.

Despite these affirmations, the historic role of women in many Muslim societies has been shaped more by patriarchal social rules than by the Quran itself. Women are allowed to work, but often under conditions that require them to prioritise their roles as mothers and wives and to maintain modesty in dress and behaviour, especially in mixed-gender settings.

In some communities, men have extensive control over their wives, including decisions about everyday activities, and religious justifications have sometimes been used to permit or excuse domestic violence.

Marriage laws in some contexts give husbands authority over their wives and permit punishment, including physical discipline, when wives are judged to “misbehave,” particularly in more conservative regions. Women are forbidden to engage in unlawful

sexual intercourse, and in some jurisdictions punishment can include flogging. Islamic law provides women with property and inheritance rights, but actual practice may be limited by local customs and family structures, and property is sometimes controlled through the male line.

In recent years, some Muslim-majority countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have granted women more rights, including the right to drive and vote, yet substantial restrictions and gender inequalities remain

Hinduism

The Persian word “Hindu” is derived from Sindhu, the Sanskrit name of the Indus River. It originally meant a native of India and the land around and beyond the Indus, and later came to mean someone who followed the indigenous religion rather than converting to Islam or other faiths. Hinduism is complex and diverse, it is often described as Sanatana Dharma (eternal dharma) and lacks a single founder, central authority, or rigid dogmas.

Impact of Hinduism on Women

Hinduism has one of the strongest presences of the divine feminine among world religions, worshipping goddesses such as Kali and Durga. However, this religious veneration does not always translate into equal treatment of women in society. There is a strongly patriarchal outlook that the father or husband is usually the head of the household and decision maker. Education for girls was commonly forbidden, based on the belief that if women learned to read and write, they would neglect family responsibilities. The idea of “keeping the woman behind the curtain” was prevalent, women were seen primarily as instruments for childbirth, and child marriage was permitted in many regions.

The dowry system, involving property or valuables given by the bride’s family to the groom’s family, became a major source of oppression. Dowry demands caused a heavy financial burden on brides’ families, and when demands were not met, women often faced domestic violence, including dowry deaths where women were burned or beaten by their husband’s family. The Indian government has prohibited dowry practices, and strict legal action can now be taken against those who demand dowry,

though the problem has not been completely eradicated.

Sati, the practice in which a widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre or committed suicide soon after his death, became an extreme symbol of this oppression. Women who refused sati could be ostracised as disloyal, while widowers were allowed to remarry. The Mughal emperor Akbar and later colonial authorities prohibited sati and supported widow remarriage.

Education is crucial for women's empowerment, but for centuries women in India were denied formal schooling. Girls were married off at ages 12 or 14 and told to take care of their families without proper guidance. Over time, as women began to participate in political and social movements, many people realized that women were more than "baby-making machines." The Indian state introduced constitutional guarantees, including equal rights to education and employment, and encouraged women to pursue their own careers.

Buddhism

Buddhism emerged in the 5th–6th century BCE. Its founder, Gautama Buddha, originally lived as Prince Siddhartha before renouncing his family and wandering in search of spiritual enlightenment. Buddhism became one of the major world religions, originating in India and spreading throughout Central and Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and Korea; today, Buddhist followers are found worldwide. Buddhism teaches that life is suffering caused by desire, and that to end suffering one must follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

Impact of Buddhism on Women

Buddhism is often seen as more supportive of women than many other religions, recognizing women as separate individuals with their own dreams and aspirations. The Buddha is credited with several significant moves that affected women: he recognized women's right to join the sangha (monastic community), pressed the sangha to acknowledge women's right to be leaders, and affirmed that women can develop their own personalities and individuality independent of male support. He also challenged the idea that producing male children was essential for salvation and

recognized the importance of women's education and political initiative.

The Buddha declared that women could attain Nirvana, while many Hindu thinkers denied education and full religious participation to women of all castes and classes. The Buddhist sangha gave women the right to read and write. However, patriarchal norms still prevailed: the founder was a male sage, monks became the paradigm, and nuns were often seen as secondary. Male novices rarely expected female teachers, and some scholars believe that female subordination contributed to the decline of the nuns' order in India. Even so, Buddhism did not restrict women's educational opportunities or religious freedom as severely as some other traditions, and once women proved their capabilities, the Buddha and later communities gave them responsibilities and positions.

Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism are similar yet distinct religions. Jainism is one of the oldest surviving religions of India, well established by the 5th–6th century BCE. It is primarily concerned with purifying and liberating the soul from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Jains worship spiritual masters called Jinas ("conquerors"), and followers take vows of non-violence and truthfulness to overcome desire and attachment. The path to liberation is defined by three principles known as the jewels of Jainism: right faith, right understanding, and right conduct.

Impact of Jainism on Women

In the time of Mahavira, Jainism brought new perspectives to Indian religious culture and presented itself as a religion of equality that recognised the rights of all living creatures, including women. In principle, Jainism accepts that women can play an important part on the road to liberation. However, in practice, some Jain texts present femaleness as a source of spiritual inequality.

Women are sometimes portrayed as temptresses, symbols of attachment, fickle, and treacherous. Acts of deception are considered a main characteristic of women, and some texts claim that a man who manifests deception is reborn as a woman, while a woman with a pure heart becomes a man.

The Digambara sect believes that women cannot achieve liberation without first being born as men, while the Śvetāmbara sect disagrees and argues that women can attain liberation in a female body. Digambaras also hold that nudity is essential for liberation, following Mahavira's example, and since women cannot go naked, they are excluded from the highest monastic path. The ban on female nakedness is justified partly as protection for both men and women: women's nakedness is thought to cause sexual desire in men, hindering men's liberation, and to cause shame for women, hindering their progress. Digambara texts sometimes describe women as inherently himsic (harmful), linking this to menstrual blood, which is considered impure.

This reinforces the idea that women's bodies are obstacles to spiritual progress. At the same time, Jain ethics emphasise right thinking, speaking, and acting for all, suggesting an ideal of equality that is not fully realized in gender relations.

Sikhism

Sikhism is originated in the Punjab region of South Asia at the beginning of the 16th century and flourished under a succession of ten gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak(1459- 1539) and ending with Guru Gobind Singh (1666- 1708). Sikhism emphasises devotion to one God through meditative worship and singing from a canon of devotional compositions.

The gurus's teachings are preserved in two key scriptures, especially the Adi Granth, which Sikhs revere as their eternal Guru.

Impact on Sikhism on Women

The fundamentals of Sikhism state the men and women both possess an equal right to cultivate their spirituality. Women are allowed to take part in all religious, social, cultural, and secular activities, including leading religious congregations, performing kirtans, and working as granthis (scripture readers and custodians).

Guru Nanak proclaimed equality for both men and women, and all the Gurus encouraged both genders to participate in Sikh community life. Sikh history records many women who showed devotion, sacrifice, service and bravery on an equal footing

with men. Menstruation is not considered an impurity in the Sikh community and women's behavior is not restricted during this time. Female infanticide is strictly prohibited, and the codes of conduct instruct Sikhs to avoid relationships with those who practice it. The practice of Sati or Widow burning is completely forbidden in Sikh scripture, and widow remarriage is encouraged.

Sikhism also criticises veiling and secluding women and the Gurus condemned such practices, helping many communities move away from veiling. The Sikh tradition has also criticised dowry and other rituals that degrade women, through cultural practices sometimes diverge from these ideals.

II. CONCLUSION

The paper has explored how major world religions have both oppressed and at times, empowered women. Across Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, religious texts and practices have frequently placed women in subordinate positions, limiting their rights in education, property, religious leadership and public life.

In many contexts, the situation of women in rural settings has been worse because of lack of education and deeply entrenched patriarchal mindsets. At the same time, women in all these religious communities have resisted and reshaped oppressive structures. Many religions contain teachings about spiritual equality and justice, which women and allies have used to argue for reform.

Today, the direct control of religion over women's lives has lessened in many societies, as women gain education and the freedom to develop their own personalities and choose their lifestyles. However, in certain areas of the world, women are still fighting for basic rights. The complete removal of oppression requires changing how women are viewed : they must be seen and treated as full human beings and individuals with the right to live their lives as they choose.

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