

Islam and Sikhism: A comparative view on Women



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The role and status of women in all of the major faiths has become an important and often heated issue for today's society. For many, religion is an important aspect of their lives and plays a leading part in their thought processes, decisions and way of life. This applies to men and women. Increasingly, women are enquiring about their position, role and importance in their respective faiths. Many want to look back to the original doctrine and see what has been said about them.

This article will review the beliefs held by both Islam and Sikhism, with specific attention focussing on the Holy Quran and Guru Granth Sahib Ji. The issues have been sectioned off for ease of read.

Salvation

An important point to raise is whether a Religion considers women capable of achieving salvation, a realisation of God or the highest spiritual realm. On this matter, both Islam and Sikhism profess that a woman can reach salvation,

'For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.' (Holy Quran 33:35)

As long as the woman is willing to achieve the virtues stated, she is capable of receiving God's great reward. In the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, it is emphasised that it is the human birth that is important and that the light of God rests equally in us all,

*'In all beings is the Lord pervasive,
The Lord pervades all forms male and female'* (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 605)

By looking within through meditation on God's name can women realise God. Sikhism does not distinguish between the sexes in this matter. Both can obtain salvation by following the Guru. Often, woman is considered evil and a hindrance to man's spirituality. The Guru rejects this. In *Current Thoughts On Sikhism* Alice Basarke states *'the first Guru put woman on a par with man. ... woman was not a hindrance to man, but a partner in serving God and seeking salvation'*.

Education

Both faiths consider education very important. It is the key to anyone's success. It is personal development. In *Women in the Quran and the Sunna*, Prof. Abdur Rahman I. Doi states *'The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Seeking knowledge is a mandate for every Muslim (male and female)." This includes knowledge of the Qur'an and the Hadith as well as other knowledge. Men and women both have the capacity for learning and understanding.'* The faith places a great importance on knowledge.

Similarly, Sikhism places great importance on knowledge. Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Guru, set up many schools amongst his disciples for education. Many of these schools still survive today. True knowledge about divinity can be obtained through the Guru,

'All divine knowledge and contemplation is obtained through the Guru'. Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 831

Education for all is essential. All must aim to be the best they can be. Fifty-two of the Sikh missionaries sent out by the third Guru were women. In *The Role and Status of Sikh Women* Dr Mohinder Kaur Gill states *'Guru Amar Das was convinced that no teachings can take roots until and unless they are accepted by women folk'*.

Hereditary rights

Islam preserves some hereditary rights for women. This was, at the time, an important advancement, economically, for Muslim women. The Holy Quran states,

*'Allah (thus) directs you As regards your children's (Inheritance).
A portion equal to that of two females; if only daughters, two or more,
Their share is two-thirds of the inheritance. If only one, her share is a half.'* (Holy Quran 4:11)

The laws concerning hereditary rights for Muslim women are quite detailed. Generally, but not always, the male takes a double share of the woman. The reason is that there is a distinguished difference between the role to be played by men and women, thus giving the man a larger portion.

Hereditary rights have never been an issue in Sikhism. Sikh women have full rights to contest any hereditary claim. No restrictions can be found in the Sikh Rehat Maryada (Code of Sikh Conduct). There is nothing to state otherwise. In *Women's Property Rights - A Sikh Perspective*, Prof. Dalip Singh states *'Since all Children, both male and female are equal in all respects, the property of the father is equally divisible amongst the children; women married and unmarried, have equal share along with the male progeny'*. Thus, all claimants are entitled to an equal share regardless of their gender.

Gender Equality

With reference to equality amongst the sexes, the Holy Quran states,

'Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, Because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means.' (Holy Quran, 4:34)

Consequently, men are considered superior to women. The reasoning is that the role of men is different from that of women, thus dictating their superiority. Men support women. Their role in society is considered more important. The commentator Razi claims, *'Man is more perfect than the woman in creation, and intelligence, and in the religious sphere, such as the suitability to be a judge, and a leader in worship. Also, the testimony of the man is twice that of the woman. So that whoever is given great responsibilities must be given correspondingly great privileges. As the woman is deficient in intelligence and of great lust, if she is given much money, much corruption will be the result.'* Further support to this view can be found in the Hadith (Ibn Kathir, Commenting on Q. 4:34, this Hadith is also reported by Abu Dawood and al-Nisa'I and Ibn Magah.), the second most important book for Muslims. Commenting on a section of the Hadith relating to women in *The Place of Women in Pure Islam*, M. Rafiqul-Haqq and P. Newton claim *'The authenticity of the above Hadith is undisputed. It is reported by the two most reliable collections of Hadith; Bukhari and Muslim. The agreement of Bukhari and Muslim on its authenticity makes it (mutafaqun 'alayhi) 'agreed upon', which is the highest degree of authenticity. The above Hadith has been accepted and used by eminent scholars, such as Ghazali, Ibn al-'Arabi, Razi, Suyouti, Qortobi, Nawawi, and Ibn Kathir, in their writings'*.

Sikhism takes a different approach in discussing gender equality. Like Islam, Sikhism considers men and women to be different by virtue of their gender. However, this difference does not imply superiority of one sex over the other. Men and women are equal under the eyes of God. They have equality, and more importantly, equal opportunity. No position in Sikhism is reserved solely for men. Women can take part in prayers and serve as Granthis. Sikh women can also take part in any political role they feel fit to accommodate. Concerning the denigration of women, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji clearly states,

*"from the woman is our birth, in the woman's womb are we shaped;
To the woman we are engaged, to the woman we are wedded;
The woman is our friend and from woman is the family;
Through the woman are the bonds of the world;
Why call woman evil who gives birth to the world's leaders?
From the woman is the woman, without woman there is none".* (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pp. 473)

The question posed by the Guru to mankind is 'Why call her evil?'. The Guru calls the woman a vessel through which all life comes to this world. This is a unique role given to her by God. Further, concerning identity, the Guru considers the woman to be a Princess, giving her the Surname *Kaur*. This is reserved solely for women and frees them from having to take their husband's name when marrying.

Importance of the Woman's view

The Holy Quran has this statement concerning the importance of a woman's views,

'And if there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as ye choose, for witnesses. So that if one of them errs, the other can remind her'. (The Holy Quran, 2:282)

When there is a requirement for witnesses on a transaction and one of two men is unavailable, then two women can take the role of one man. This is to ensure that if one of them makes a mistake, the other woman can correct her. Discussing this in *Why Two Women Witnesses ??*, Shamsad M Khan claims *'As for women we are aware of the cyclical psychological strains that she has to encounter. The symptoms during early pregnancy, the ante-natal and post-natal depressions, the phenomenon of menopause, the physiological and psychological problems faced after miscarriage. It is under these situations that women can experience psychological strains giving rise to depression, lack of concentration, slow mindedness and SHORT TERM MEMORY LOSS'* (capitals from original) . Thus, her physical make up, in other words her menstrual cycle, makes her weaker in dealing with legal matters and can affect her decision making. In *The Status of Woman in Islam*, Hammuda Abdul-Ati, PH.D gives a different reason for the requirement of two women witnesses, *'... woman as a rule, is not so experienced in practical life as man. This lack of experience may cause a loss to any party in a given contract. So the law requires that at least two women should bear witness with one man. If a woman of the witness forgets something, the other one would remind her. Or if she makes an error, due to lack of experience, the other would help to correct her. This is a precautionary measure to guarantee honest transactions and proper dealings between people'*. Thus, the lack of experience deems it necessary to have two women witnesses and only one male witness.

The question of considering the woman as inadequate in taking the role of a witness equally with any man has never been in question in Sikhism. When a matter requires addressing a Sikh can approach the *Panj Pyaras* for a decision. Any member of the *Panj Pyaras* can be a woman. Thus, her ability to perform her duties as a Sikh, regardless of her menstruation, is not doubted. Woman has been created by God and cannot be considered inferior,

'Women and men, all by God are created, All this is God's play. Says Nanak, All thy creation is good, Holy'. (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg 304)

God's creation is considered holy. There is no suggestion of inferiority amongst the role women can play. Neither is her intelligence doubted. Between humans there is only one distinction made. In *Current thoughts in Sikhism*, Dr Gurnam Kaur expounds *'All human beings are equal from birth. There are only two classes of human beings (man or woman) viz., manmukh and gurmukh. Those who follow the path of the Guru, obey the will of God, the divine ordinance are called gurmukhs, and those who follow the path of their own mind, act according to their ego running away from the Guru, the Shabad (the word), are manmukhs (egoists)'*.

Opportunity to Pray

Islam allows women to be exempt from certain prayers. It is also preferred if women pray at home, rather than coming to the mosque, although they are not totally rejected from the Mosque. They have to abide by some laws when in prayer. Amongst the various opinions it can generally be stated that it is *makrooh* (not permissible) for a good-looking woman to go to the mosque, either for *jum`ah* or for any other prayer, even if she wears plain (undecorated) clothes. It is permissible (not *makrooh*) for an elderly woman to go, but she must wear plain (non-fancy) clothes. The woman should obtain permission from a male guardian (whether father, husband or otherwise). The main issue arising from the woman's presence in a mosque is her ability to cause lustful thoughts for a praying man. In fact, any Muslim man travelling to a mosque is more fortunate if he avoids contact with any woman. If such contact does occur, he is required to purify himself. The Holy Quran states,

'O you who believe! Approach not prayers In a state of intoxication, Until you can understand all you say, Nor in a state of ceremonial impurity, Except when you are passing by (through the Mosque), Until after washing Your whole body, If you are ill, or on a journey, or one of you comes from the privy, or you have been in contact with women, and you find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand, and rub therewith your faces and hands, For Allah does blot out sins and forgive again and again' (Holy Quran 4:43)

The purification required if contact is made with women is also mentioned in Surah 5:6. Even if a woman is to attend prayers, she must place herself in specific areas to avoid disrupting the prayers of men. According to the Hadith (Reported by Muslim) the best rows (in prayer) for men are the first (front) ones, and the worst for them are the last ones, while for women it is the opposite. Further, the Hadith (reported by Muslim) states: *'Oh assembly of women! Do not raise your heads (from ruku/sujud) until after the*

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men have done so'. This will avoid any lustful thoughts. In fact, the following Hadith, which is considered *Hassan*, agreed upon, indicates,

'A woman is closest to God's face, if she is found in the core of her house. And the prayer of the woman in the house is better than her prayer in the mosque'

(Ihy'a 'Uloum ed-Din by Ghazali, Dar al-Kotob al-'Elmeyah, Beirut, Vol II, Kitab Adab al-Nikah, p.65.
Reported by Tirmizi as a true and good Ahadith)

In Sikhism, the aim is to rid the soul of sins and realise God by the Guru's guidance. Once this is achieved, and God can be realised from within, the inner character becomes absorbed and strengthened by God. Thus, it is not the woman who is to be blamed for any sins that occur in men when they see her, but in the men who still allow lust to dominate their *maan*, mind,

'Vain are the eyes which behold the beauty of another's wife' (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 269).

Any woman is permitted to enter a Gurdwara, and is accepted in all prayers and recitations of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. No area is made exempt. She is an integral part of the *Sadh Sangat* (True congregation) and is capable of joining anyone in praising God, whether it be through Gurbani recitation, Naam Simran or Kirtan (devotional singing). The only restriction placed is that the woman should not enter the Gurdwara wearing a veil over her face. The Sikh Rehat Maryada clearly states that women should not cover their faces with veils,

'It is not proper for a Sikh woman to wear a veil or keep her face hidden by veil or cover'
(Sikh Rehat Maryada, Article XVI, s).

Guru Amar Das had refused an audience with a Hindu queen until she had removed her veil. In *Women in Religion* Kanwaljit Kaur-Singh writes *'the purdah (veil) system suppressed the personality of women and reflected their inferior status'*. Of course, Sikh men cannot wear veils either.

Restrictions on clothes

Islam has some very specific codes which address the way a woman should dress,

'And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except To their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hand possess, or male attendants free of sexual desires, or small children who have no carnal knowledge of women. And that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments'.

(Holy Quran, 24:31)

Thus, the dress code concerns the display of beauty. A woman should not allow men to see her beauty and become sexually aroused. Hammuda Abdul-Ati claims *'The Muslim woman is always associated with an old tradition known as the "veil". It is Islamic that the woman should beautify herself with the veil of honor, dignity, chastity, purity and integrity. She should refrain from all deeds and gestures that might stir the passions of people other than her legitimate husband or cause evil suspicion of her morality. She is warned not to display her charms or expose her physical attractions before strangers. The veil which she must put on is one that can save her soul from weakness, her mind from indulgence, her eyes from lustful looks, and her personality from demoralization. Islam is most concerned with the integrity of woman, with the safeguarding of her morals and morale and with the protection of her character and personality'*.

Sikhism, besides commanding that women do not wear the veil, makes a simple, yet very important, statement concerning dress code. This applies to all Sikhs, regardless of gender,

*'Friend, all other wear ruins happiness, the wear that to the limbs is torment,
and with foul thinking fills the mind'* (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 16)

Thus, the individual Sikh knows what types of clothes fill the mind with evil thoughts and are commanded not to wear these. This applies to all Sikhs. Aside from this, all Sikhs are to wear their articles of faith, the five K's. This applies to men and women. For women this is quite unique. For the first time in history, women were expected to defend themselves and others with their Kirpans. They were not expected to remain dependent on men for physical protection. The Guru expected women to be Saints and Soldiers, *Sant-Sipahi*. The psychological effect this has on women is astounding. They are commanded to face up to their independence.

Menstruation

A faith's view on menstruation is a good indicator on its tolerance towards women. It gives a very clear insight into the views held on women, the birth process and respect for the woman's body. The Holy Quran makes the following statement on menstruation,

*'They ask thee concerning women's courses
Say: they are a hurt and a pollution:
So keep away from women in their courses,
and do not approach them until They are clean.
But when they have purified themselves,
Ye may approach them As ordained for you by Allah
For Allah loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.'* (Holy Quran 2:222)

Menstruation is considered a hurt and pollutant (The actual term used is *Azan*). A man is instructed to avoid her, and she herself cannot take part in fasting nor prayers during her menstrual cycle. Men are forbidden from having sex with women during their menstruation, but in Surah 2:223, they are encouraged to approach their wives for sex whenever the desire occurs,

*'Your wives are as a field unto you,
So approach your field When or how ye will.'* (Holy Quran 2:223)

Men have sexual rights over their wives and any slave girls they possess. The following Hadith expands on this by claiming,

*'The prophet 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'*
Mishkat al-Masabih, Book I, Section 'Duties of husband and wife', Hadith No. 61.

These rights do not apply to women. The woman is actually cursed if she refuses sex with her husband.

*'The messenger of Allah said: Whenever a man calls his wife to his bed and she refuses,
and then he passes the night in an angry mood,
the angels curse her till she gets up at dawn'*
Mishkat al-Masabih, Book I, Section 'Duties of husband and wife', Hadith No. 54.

In Sikhism, the menstrual cycle is not considered a pollutant. Certainly, it can have a physical and physiological effect on the woman. Nonetheless, this is not considered a hindrance to her wanting to pray or accomplish her religious duties fully. The Guru makes it very clear that the menstrual cycle is a God given process. The blood of a woman is required for the creation of any human being,

*'By coming together of mother and father are we created,
By union of the mother's blood and the father's semen is the body made.
To the Lord is the creature devoted, when hanging head downwards in the womb;
He whom he contemplates, for him provides.'* (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 1013).

The requirement of the Mothers' blood is fundamental for life. Thus, the menstrual cycle is certainly an essential and God given biological process. In other faiths blood is considered a pollutant. However, the Guru rejects such superstitious ideas. Those who are impure from within are the truly impure ones.

*'Should cloth be reckoned impure if blood-stained,
How may minds of such be deemed pure, As blood of mankind suck?
Says Nanak : With a pure heart and tongue God's Name you utter :
All else is worldly show, and false deeds.'* (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 140).

Meditating on Gods' name is of importance. Whether your clothes are blood stained or not (including clothes stained from menstrual blood) is not of spiritual importance. Thus, there are no restrictions placed on a woman during her menstruation. She is

free to visit the Gurdwara, take part in prayers and do *Seva*. In *The feminine principle in the Sikh vision of the transcendent* Nikky Guninder Kaur-Singh writes *'The denigration of the female body "expressed in many cultural and religious taboos surrounding menstruation and child-Birth" is absent in the Sikh worldview. ... Guru Nanak openly chides those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation'*.

Marriage and spousal relationships

The relationship between a husband and wife in Islam has to be considered with reference to Surah 4:34, mentioned in part earlier. The roles of men and women are considered different to the extent that men have superiority over women. They are more equal than woman as they are the maintainers of women,

'And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; But men have a degree over them' (Holy Quran 2:228)

Due to the difference in gender, women have less rights than men. Some rights are reserved for women to ensure they are not abused. The rights concerning divorce are such examples. As for polygamy, women may only marry one partner at a time. However, men can marry up to four times, as long as they can treat each wife equally. Further, they may keep as many slave girls as is required, but must not ill treat them.

'And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course.' (Holy Quran, 4:3)

However, the Quran also makes it evident that it can be very difficult to treat each wife equally,

'You are never able to do justice between wives, Even if it is your ardent desire.' (Holy Quran, 4:129)

Further, men are also permitted to marry those woman who become captives during a *Jihad* (holy war).

'Also (prohibited are) Women already married, Except those Whom your right hands possess' (Holy Quran, 4:24)

The term *right hands possess* refers to those who have been captured. Their previous marriage counts for nothing. So does their reluctance to have sex with their captors,

'But force not your maids to have sex when they desire chastity, in order that you may make gains in the goods of this life. But if anyone forces them, yet after such compulsion, Is God forgiving, merciful to them' (Holy Quran, 24:33)

On the whole, the superiority of men in marriage and towards their women slaves and maids outweighs the rights the women possess. If a husband feels his wife is overbearing in character, then he is permitted to beat her.

'the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great.' (Holy Quran, 4:34)

The beating of women is permitted, but it must be light in nature. The Hadith makes it clear that a woman can never fulfil the rights a Husband has over her. He is her maintainer.

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'If a woman offered one of her breasts to be cooked and the other to be roasted, she still will fall short of fulfilling her obligations to her husband. And besides that if she disobeys her husband even for a twinkling of an eye, she would be thrown in the lowest part of Hell, except she repents and turns back.' Tuffaha, Ahmad Zaky, Al-Mar'ah wal- Islam, Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, Beirut, first edition, 1985, p. 176. It is also quoted in Al-Musanaf by Abu Bakr Ahmad Ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Mousa Al-Kanadi who lived 557H., vol. 1 part 2, p. 255.

'If blood, suppuration, and pus, were to pour from the husband's nose and the wife licked it with her tongue, she would still never be able to fulfil his rights over her.' Imam Suyouti, the Muslim scholar.

Sikhism takes a different view concerning the relationship between a Husband and wife. Marriage is considered a part of the spiritual journey to realise God. It is not considered a hindrance to the Human's goal to realise God within. The Guru reveals,

'They are not said to be Husband and Wife who merely sit together, Rather they alone are called Husband and Wife, Who have one soul in two bodies.' (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 788.)

In Sikhism, the marriage ceremony is referred to as the *Anand Karaj*. Anand means Bliss and Karaj means something one does. Marriage is the uniting of two souls. It is an important step on the path of spirituality. The responsibility of the householder is considered spiritual. The Guru rejects the idea of renunciation and celibacy as being religiously necessary. The union of man and woman is an important part of the individual's spiritual journey. The Guru promotes the householder's way of life. Everything can be achieved in family life. There is no need to renounce the world. Concerning her standing with man, Bhai Gurdas, a Sikh during the 16th Century, reveals,

'Woman is one half of the complete personality of man, and is entitled to share secular and spiritual knowledge equally' (Gurdas ji Var 5, Pauri 16:59)

Thus, there is no notion of the woman being considered inferior to her husband. Concerning their fidelity towards each other, Bhai Kahan Singh in his famous monograph *Gurmat Martand*, states that at the time of marriage the virtues of *Patti Brata* (Absolute fidelity to Husband) are to be impressed upon the bride and, equally, the same virtue of *Istri Brata* (Absolute fidelity to Wife) is to be emphatically emphasised upon the bridegroom. These oaths are to be made by the couple in the *Sangat* (Holy congregation).

Whereas Islam permits beatings when a wife is found to be overbearing, Sikhism takes a more conciliatory view. Concerning marital problems, the Guru reveals,

*'Should brass, gold or iron be broken,
The smith in fire fuses it together.
Should the husband with the wife have break of relations,
Through progeny are their bonds forged again.
The ruler when making a demand,
By a levy is placated.
The hungry by food are satisfied.
With rain and inundating rivers is famine lifted.
In love, through sweet speech comes reunion.
Denial of religious scriptures with truthfulness is healed.
The dead to the world by righteousness are tied.
These in the world be the means of reconciliation.
The stubborn fool by a blow on the face alone will be set right.
Thus does Nanak affirm:
At the Court Divine comes recognition by Divine laudation.'* (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 143)

The Guru acknowledges that a marriage can become broken. However, there is a positive approach to such situations. Through their children the couple can find love again. Through love can they overcome difficulties, and not through beatings.

CONCLUSION

Islam considers men and women to be equal, but gives men more rights. This is due to the role given to them as men. They maintain women. Obedient women are more likely to receive the rewards of God. Thus, the balance concerning equal opportunities favours men to women.

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Sikhism considers there to be a difference between men and women, but rejects any notion that this difference entails men being superior. Women, both spiritually and secularly, are equal to men. They have equal opportunity to realise God.

SWAN (Sikh Woman's Awareness Network) is an organisation set up under the Akaal Purkh Ki Fauj (UK) dedicated to the promotion of the role and status of Sikh women. For more details contact Jatinder Singh at:

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