



## **Position of Women in Islam and Buddhism: A Comparative Study**

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### Article Info

Received: 02.05.2017  
Accepted: 15.06.2017  
Published online: 01.09.2017

ISSN: 2231-8968

### **Abstract**

The position of women has been a subject of an important interest in recent decades. In all cultures, particularly in the Western, there has been a rethinking of the position accorded to women in all areas of activity. This has led to an important change in the part performed by women in public, financial and even governmental life. This reappraisal has also moved on the query of the place accorded to women in the main religious traditions around the world. Women have been given certain public, financial and governmental privileges in the Western after decades of struggle which Islam had confirmed certainly 14 centuries ago. Islam has resolved the privileges and responsibilities of both men and women in such a balanced way, but this place of women has been the subject to repeated controversy issue because of the misinterpretations about women in our community. Today, when the part of Women in Society is an issue of worldwide interest it is convenient that we should pause to look at it from Islamic and Buddhist perspective. In previous times, a number of books have been published on the changing position of women in Hindu and Islamic cultures, but with regard to women in Buddhism very little interest has been taken in the subject. It seems, therefore, justified to increase again the query whether the place of women in Buddhist cultures was better than that in non-Buddhist cultures.

**Keywords: Position of Women, Women in Islam, Women in Buddhism**

### **Introduction**

Throughout our history as human beings, no class of our society has quite endured what the woman has had to endure. For millennia, women across the world have been viewed as inferior to men, reliant on men, and ought to be subservient to men. Though women have contributed and accomplished just as much as men to our success as a human race, even today, their contributions and accomplishments throughout history are often overlooked or belittled. Yet, in the past 40 years women are experiencing a social revolution to which their contributions, achievements, and value are becoming more evident with each passing day.

This feminist revolution, however, is not uniform across the world. Where there are some countries where the feminist revolution is as apparent as the sun in the sky, in other places it is small and insignificant or simply non-existent. Which brings forth the question, how in our

current world that is deeply affected by globalization, where the transfer of information is easy and instant, could we have such a disparity in what can only be described as a natural evolution of mankind? To answer that, we must first answer a few more fundamental questions.

### **The Feminist Movement of the Modern Age**

First, why now? Humans have existed for thousands of years, knowledge and education has been available for thousands of years, social justice and equality has been debated for at least hundreds of years. Why is it that only in the past couple of decades did this Cultural Revolution start? And why is it years ahead in the western world as opposed to the rest of the world, or the Islamic world in particular since it is under the most scrutiny over women's rights worldwide. Are the women of today simply stronger and more ambitious than the women of the past?

The answer is simple, technology. At the dawn of the 20th century, white collar jobs contributed to less than 15% of the workforce worldwide, with the remaining 85% being comprised of blue collar jobs, jobs pertaining to manual labour. Today in most first-world countries, white collar office jobs contribute upwards of 60% of the workforce. In developing countries, however, the percent of white collar jobs within the workforce is still between 15% and 25%. In a job where no manual labor or physical ability is required, women have no problem competing with men. However, in physically demanding jobs, it is near impossible for most women to compete with their male counterparts.

While in the past we relied on good old fashioned man power to produce our goods, today we have massive, highly advanced machines that work without fatigue or protest and produce an output like we have never imagined. Our recent technological advances have opened up opportunities for women to work in whatever professional field they desire, and it is technology that answers all our preceding questions. Our technological revolution has led to another revolution, a social revolution, and the phase within this technological revolution in each country directly coincides with the phase of its respective social revolution.

There are still, however, social restraints on the feminist revolution. It is in our nature to contest change. That is where tradition is born from. The act of doing something solely for the reason that this is how it has been done before. A sense of pride taken from the continuation of past rituals and a sense of identity in replicating the behaviours of your ancestors, and therein lies the conflict. As some cultures advance through the revolution and outrun others, conflicts arise fuelled by our differences.

### **The introduction of Islam and the emergence of the Muslim Woman**

Today the Muslim woman is widely considered to be captive in a male dominated culture with no hope to rise, succeed, or flourish. Countless accounts of women being deprived of their rights and needs are documented across the Muslim world. And from these accounts, a notion evolves that it is within the fundamentals of Islam to oppress women. To definitively ascertain that notion we have to study the foundation of Islam and its most prominent texts.

The introduction of Islam to the world came sometime in the middle of the first millennium of the Common Era. It spread from the Arab peninsula all the way across North Africa and up into Europe. Within its domain, it established its own rules, values, and traditions. Some similar to the tenants previously obeyed, and some dramatically changing the laws of the

land. One of the things it almost completely changed was the rights and social status of women within society.

During that time, it was common practice for women to be afforded close to no rights at all. In many countries women were treated more like livestock than actual humans. In Europe, where the dark ages were in their prime, women had close to no rights at all. In some places men had the right to sell their wives, beating your wife was not only allowed but encouraged so as to keep her in her place, and women would not inherit unless they had no brothers in which case they would be married to a suitable partner and then their husband would inherit her family's wealth. Women were often treated as slaves, with no compensation for their work or contributions.

### **The holy text of Islam and its stance on men and women**

The prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, having seen the manner by which the women of his time were being treated sought to address and tackle this heinous issue, and god obliged him with a number holy texts specifically discussing the nature of the relationship between the two genders. What follows are just a few excerpts from the holy Qur'an that outline the worth of men and women in god's eyes, and their duties to each other.

“And whoso doth good works, whether of male or female, and he (or she) is a believer such will enter Paradise and they will not be wronged the dint in a date-stone” (Pickthal 4:124).

"Who so does that which is right, and believes, whether male or female, him or her will We quicken to happy life." [Noble Quran 16:97]

“Lo! men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who persevere (in righteousness) and women who persevere, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who guard their modesty, and men who remember Allah much and women who remember - Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward” (Pickthal 33:35).

These texts take special care to state that they are directed towards both men and women are doing so for a specific purpose. The Qur'an states that men and women are equal in every way, two parts of the same thing. These texts emphasize that the obligations set forth in the Qur'an apply to both men and women. They also serve to emphasize that both will be judged on the same scale and both will be rewarded and punished to the same degree. For in the eyes of god, the worth of any human being is based not on his gender or color, but on the merits of his or her actions throughout their life.

However, establishing that women were spiritually men's equals was not enough, for there were grave crimes being committed against them. The Qur'an contains many texts specifically discussing the nature of the relationship between the two genders.

It was an accepted idea that men had the right over women while women had little to no rights over men. A man could be disloyal, but a woman could not. A man could neglect his wife,

but a woman could not neglect her husband. A man had the right to choose to work and what to work, a woman did not. A man had the right to choose his mate, a woman did not. The Qur'an's response to this:

"And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women." [Noble Quran 2:228]

"They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them." [Noble Quran 2:187]

"And their Lord hath heard them (and He saith): Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. Ye proceed one from another" (Pickthal 3:195)

"O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread a broad multitude of men and women" (Pickthal 4:1).

"(58) When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief!

(59) With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! what an evil (choice) they decide on?

(60) To those who believe not in the Hereafter, applies the similitude of evil: to Allah applies the highest similitude: for He is the Exalted in Power, full of Wisdom."

"O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry you have given them - except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike something and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good." [Noble Quran 4:19]

### **The position and effects of the woman in Islamic Society**

Before Islam, men committed heinous crimes against women, and Islam sought to remedy that. These texts serve to state that women are men's equals and should be treated as such. You should afford women the same rights and luxuries afforded to men. You should not treat them harshly or violently. Beyond these texts the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, discussed these relations even further. He stated "Women are the twin halves of men". He preached kindness towards them stating "Fear Allah in respect of women" and "the best of you are they who treat their wives best" and "a man should not dislike his wife and should he be displeased with one vice in her, may he be pleased with a virtue within her" and "The more gentle and civil and generous a man is to his wife, the more perfect in his faith he is".

As a result of the values and lessons instilled within Islamic cultures, the Muslim woman thrived far more than any other woman in the world. While other cultures thought education

would be wasted on a woman, Muslim women were not only encouraged but obligated to pursue knowledge.

Muslim women had to accept a man's proposal before they were to be married. As young girls they would take classes in school and attend lectures in mosques. When they grew up, many women would work as merchants and other professions with some accumulating massive fortunes. When they got married, they could continue working but their first priority had to be their household and family. Money the wife earned was to be kept by the wife and to be spent on whatever she desired for just as raising the children was her responsibility it was the husband's job to support the family financially. Some women rose to high positions in politics and possessed massive political power. Unlike in other areas of the world where the death of the king before his male heir reached maturity would result either in the premature crowning of the heir, or an appointment of a male protector until the prince came of age. In the Islamic world a widows Queen would rule over the land until the heir came of age.

The acceptance and integration of women into society in the Islamic world proved very rewarding as women contributed to the success of all the ministries across the board. Their contributions led to advances in science, to beautiful works of art, to the strengthening of the economy, and to the education of the generations to come. Many of the most beautiful poems and music of the ancient Islamic world were created by women, and many of the most beautiful mosques constructed were designed by female architects. There is no doubt that the inclusion of women in the workforce in the Islamic world is one of the main reasons the Muslim empire was able to scientifically, socially, and artistically outperform its European neighbours for the better part of the first millennium of the common era.

### **Differences between men and women in the Muslim Society**

There are however different rules and obligations that men and women must bear in the Islamic society, and these rules and regulations are a result of their respective roles within the society. While neither men nor women are limited in what they can aspire to or achieve, they both have predetermined requirements they must meet before any other pursuit is considered.

The Qur'an says we were created as pairs, with each one more capable in some aspects than the other and both dependent on each other to enjoy a complete life. In stating that, it is not referencing the fact that you need both a man and a woman to birth a child, but the fact that they need each other in every aspect of their lives.

The man is tasked with the protection of the household and its financial well-being. The woman is tasked with the maintenance of the household and the care of their children. This does not mean that a man cannot play a role in raising their children, maintaining the household, or pursuing any other lawful desire he may have, but he must first fulfill his obligation before doing anything else. Similarly, a woman can work or pursue any project she desires so long as she has first completed her obligations.

These different roles that they must fulfill lead to different obligations and so double standards which can be confused with sexism. Yet that would be a mistake. For while we are all equal in the eyes of god when it comes to faith, we are equal because what is demanded of us is the same. However, in a society with different roles, you cannot set one standard to measure the success and failure of all just as you cannot judge the physical capabilities of a fish and a lion on their ability to stay under water longer.

The most evident of double standards that exist to this day all around the world is morality. For women are held under a much harsher scope when it comes to morality than men. Two teenagers may engage in premarital sex but the girl will surely face much more severe consequences than the boy. An injustice in and of itself, and yet why? Another question you could ask is why is it shameful for a man to be physically weak but not for a woman? Why is it shameful for a man to be a coward but not for a woman? Why is it shameful for a woman to be immoral but less so for a man?

All comes back to their roles in society. For a woman is not obligated to protect the household, is not obligated to defend against intruders, so it is of little importance her physical abilities or her courage. A man however must defend his home in case someone desires to do them ill and so his strength and bravery are held under much scrutiny. He must learn to fight and learn how to ride, or in today's world, drive to better fulfill his duties.

Yet both men and women are obligated to be moral, so why is it more imperative for a woman than a man? Well what is the woman's role again? An immoral man will only poison those around him, and those who suffer his poison are mostly grown and therefore more equipped to defend their own virtue. An immoral woman however not only poisons those around, but also raise immoral children. Who in turn poison those around them and raise more immoral children. It is because the woman becomes a mother that she must be held to the highest of standards, for while men create most of what is today, women create most of what is tomorrow. Women raise and mould the generations to come. If they are immoral women, they will raise an immoral generation. If they are moral women, they will raise a moral generation.

### **The Muslim Woman in the Modern Age**

Today there are many misconceptions about the role of women in the Muslim world, by both Muslims and non-Muslims. In the Arab peninsula, some traditions such as the style of dressing, the growing of facial hair, the customs of greeting are still upheld. Unfortunately, some of the most fundamental pillars of Islam such as the pursuit of knowledge and the value of hard work have since been overlooked.

This lack of education has crippled the Arab society not only in their knowledge of our world, but also in their knowledge of Islam. All these misconceptions are solely a result of ignorance. Women are not pressured or encouraged to be educated, even though that goes against what Islam says. The Qur'an states the pursuit of knowledge is one of the fundamentals of Islam and yet we do not strive for it. Women are not allowed to drive in some places and yet that is completely irrational. It is a deformation of ancient laws. At the dawn of Islam men were obligated to learn how to ride horses, women were not. That doesn't mean women weren't allowed, they just weren't obligated to as they did not go to war with the men. At the same time during times of war and civil unrest women were required to walk with a man when in public for their protection as the state of security was not solidified. Somehow as the years past these rules we misinterpreted. Another misconception that is very common in the west is that women often are often raped with no repercussions befalling the rapist because a woman needs four witnesses of the rape to accuse the man. This however is incorrect, for you need four witnesses accuse a couple of adultery, meaning it was consensual sex between a man and a woman. However to file rape charges the woman doesn't need any witnesses, only her own testimony and any compelling evidence to make a case. These are all misconceptions between cultures that can very easily be

remedied. We need only talk and not shout, discuss and not argue, and we will find that there are a great many things we misunderstood.

### **Buddhism and the Buddhist woman**

Another culture we might look into to further understand the position of women in the developing world is Buddhism. The position and role of women in Buddhist cultures is a bit more difficult to ascertain as there are many different schools of Buddhism and no universally agreed upon text to use as a curriculum. Instead there are many different individual texts and each school subscribes to a number of them. Where one school may teach one text, another may contest its authenticity altogether.

### **Different Schools and their stance on women**

Among the differences between these schools and the teachings they subscribe to are the role and position of the woman in society. Unfortunately, while there are some which give the woman freedom of individuality, most of them are set up so a woman must be reliant on a man, whether it be a father, husband, or son. There are some schools which offer women the possibility of attaining the highest of religious positions and reaching enlightenment, most of them only allow the woman into positions of servitude to their male counterparts. The most senior nun in a sect is a subservient junior to a young monk of one day. Nuns must also cater to monks and serve as their house keepers.

The stance of Buddha himself on women and their role in society is a highly debated subject. There are many texts claiming his support for both sides of the argument people tend to subscribe to the ones that fit their views best. One story is of a King by the name of Pasenadi (c. 6th century BCE) who went to Buddha in despair after having heard news his wife had a daughter and not a son, to which Buddha replied ‘Good daughters are just as good as good sons’. On the other hand, there are texts of Buddha stating, “The female’s defects ... greed, hate, and delusion and other defilements – are greater than the male’s ... You (women) should have such an intention ... ‘Because I wish to be freed from the impurities of the woman’s body, I will acquire the beautiful and fresh body of a man’.”

Another quote from one of the more influential monks in the history of Buddhism states “Women can be the cause of great suffering. If desire is destroyed, there will be everlasting happiness. The dead snake and dog are detestable, but women are even more detestable than they are.”

As far as reaching enlightenment goes it seems there are three prominent schools of thought on the issue. One school believes that a woman is just as capable as a man of reaching spiritual enlightenment and entering Nirvana. Another school believes woman must denounce her evil nature and be reborn as a man to fully reach enlightenment and enter Nirvana. While the third school believes that a woman simply is incapable of attaining enlightenment and so can never enter Nirvana.

### **Monks and Nuns in Buddhism**

The misogyny within Buddhism becomes extremely apparent across the boards, however, when it comes to sexuality. An overwhelming portion of the texts of Buddhism paint the woman as a

seductress hellbent on using her sexual features to lure the man away from the path of enlightenment. In the texts, it is the woman that lusts for sexual intercourse as well as other sexual acts and attempts to seduce the man at every opportunity. It is so that the monks are raised to treat women with little trust, to treat them as sexual predators that seek to steal their virtue.

Monks are advised to sleep indoors out of fear that if they sleep outdoors a woman may take advantage of their vulnerable state to have sex with them. The Buddha once stated, "Of all the scents that can enslave, none is more lethal than that of a woman. Of all the tastes that can enslave, none is more lethal than that of a woman. Of all the voices that can enslave, none is more lethal than that of a woman." Buddhist monks were also required to cover themselves when in public out of fear they would entice women to sin, as they were sought as more desirable to women because of their chastity and celibacy.

Even women who strive for spiritual enlightenment and seek to join the monastic order are under far more scrutiny than their male counterparts. To be a monk, there are 227 rules you must abide by. To be a nun, however, there are 311 rules to abide by as they must bear the burden of their own sexual tendencies and contain them so as to not tempt the monks with their sexual deviance.

### **Buddhist women of the Modern Age**

Starting in 20th century however, Buddhism has experienced a cultural revolution. A feminist movement within Buddhism that may very well have played a major role in the Universal feminist revolution of today. For centuries, Buddhist nuns had almost all but gone extinct due to a technicality that monks with prejudice towards women used to effectively halt any ascensions to nun hood. Due to the dangers of the forest during the rise of Buddhism nuns were not allowed to venture out of the city and into the forests, for their own protection. Unfortunately, that measure which was taken to keep them safe led to their annihilation. When the villages were being attacked and raided, the monks all fled into the forest to avoid slaughter. The nuns, however, were forbidden to do so, so they remained and were slaughtered. The attacks of the middle ages almost wiped out all the nuns of the regions. That led to an even bigger problem. To become a nun, you needed at least one monk and one nun to officiate, however there were no nuns to be found. Instead of working around this technicality, the monks simply used it as an excuse to shun the women from entering into a spiritual life. As a result, hundreds of years past and the memory of nuns was almost forgotten except in some of the most remote places.

Recently, however, through much effort and against a lot of resistance, Buddhist women have reclaimed their rightful place within their society. There are now nuns in almost every institution and they have amended many laws. With each day more and more nuns are joining the path of enlightenment and their stories inspire even more women across the world. Their position in the eyes of the law has also improved a great deal. For while until very recently, women could not inherit and had to always be reliant on a man. Today women can inherit land. They can own land and goods. They can trade and sell and make a living. All these things do not seem like an accomplishment to someone growing up in today's world, but there was a time when such a life was no more than a fairytale.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, it seems we are still very far away from attaining gender equality and yet we have progressed further in the past couple of decades than in hundreds of years before. Not since the



rise of Islam have women gained so many rights and opportunities at such a rate. However, in our pursuit for gender equality there is a danger we must always be weary of. For just because man and woman are different, does not mean they are not equal. In today's society we are obsessed with treating man and woman just the same, claiming everything that applies to him should apply to her and vice versa. And in doing so we are stripping both man and woman of their own identity for the sake of equality. We must never forget that while we are equal, we are not the same and to treat us as such would be a crime as grave as giving one gender more value than the other.

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