



Protection of Women's Rights: Islamic and Sikh Perspectives

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Abstract

The protection of women's rights constitutes a central concern in both Islamic and Sikh ethical frameworks. While Islam articulates a comprehensive legal and moral system grounded in divine revelation, Sikhism advances a spiritually egalitarian vision rooted in the doctrine of Ik Onkar. This study undertakes a comparative examination of women's rights as articulated in the Holy Qur'ān, Hadith literature, and the Guru Granth Sahib. It further explores the lived experiences of early Muslim women (Sahabiyyāt) and the socio-religious ethos of Sikh tradition. The research argues that both traditions, despite differences in legal structures, converge on the fundamental principles of dignity, spiritual equality, and social justice. Through textual analysis and comparative hermeneutics, the study highlights how these religious frameworks can contribute to contemporary discourses on gender justice and human rights (Esposito, 2011; Singh, 2018).

Keywords: Protection, Women's Rights, Islamic and Sikh, Perspectives

1. Introduction

The discourse on women's rights in religious traditions has often been shaped by selective interpretations and socio-cultural overlays. However, both Islam and Sikhism present foundational texts that articulate a robust vision of gender dignity and moral equality. Islam, emerging in 7th-century Arabia, introduced radical reforms in women's legal status, including rights to inheritance, consent in marriage, and economic autonomy. Sikhism founded in 15th-century Punjab, rejected caste and gender hierarchies, advocating a spiritually egalitarian society. This article seeks to critically examine the protection of women's rights within these two traditions, focusing on scriptural foundations, historical practices, and ethical implications (Ahmed, 1992; McLeod, 2009).

2. Women's Rights in the Qur'ānic Framework

2.1 Spiritual Equality

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ... أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

(Qur'ān 33:35)

Explanation: This verse establishes unequivocal spiritual parity between men and women, affirming that divine reward is contingent upon faith and righteous action rather than gender (Nasr, 2003).

2.2 Creation and Human Dignity

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ (Qur'an 4:1)

Analysis: The notion of a single origin (nafs wāḥidah) negates hierarchical gender constructs and affirms ontological equality.

2.3 Legal Rights: Inheritance and Property

لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ... وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ (Qur'an 4:7)

Explanation: This verse institutionalizes women's right to inheritance—an unprecedented reform in its historical context (Esposito, 2011).

2.4 Economic Autonomy

فَإِنْ طَبِنَ لَكُمْ عَن سَيِّئٍ مِّنْهُ نَفْسًا فَكُلُوهُ (Qur'an 4:4)

Women retain independent control over their financial assets, reflecting economic agency.

3. Prophetic Teachings on Women's Rights

3.1 Ethical Treatment

خَيْرُكُمْ خَيْرُكُمْ لِأَهْلِهِ (Tirmidhi, Hadith:3895)

Explanation: The Prophet ﷺ links moral excellence with kindness toward women, particularly within familial structures.

3.2 Education and Knowledge

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ (Sunan ibn e maja, Hadith:224)

Scholarly interpretations extend this obligation to both men and women, reinforcing intellectual equality.

4. Role of Sahabiyyāt (Early Muslim Women)

The lived experiences of Sahabiyyāt provide practical embodiments of Qur'ānic principles.

4.1 Khadījah bint Khuwaylid (RA)

- * Successful businesswoman
- * Financial independence
- * Moral support to Prophet ﷺ

4.2 'Ā'ishah (RA)

- * Renowned scholar
- * Narrator of Hadith
- * Legal authority

These examples illustrate women's active participation in intellectual and public life (Ahmed, 1992).



5. Women's Rights in Sikhism

5.1 Foundational Equality

ਸੇ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮੇ ਰਾਜਾਨ

Explanation: "How can she be called inferior, from whom kings are born?"

This verse explicitly rejects misogyny and affirms women's dignity (Singh, 2018).

5.2 Spiritual Status

ਇਕ ਨੂਰ ਤੇ ਸਭੁ ਜਗੁ ਉਪਜਿਆ

All humanity, regardless of gender, emerges from the same divine light.

5.3 Social Participation

- * Sikhism encourages:
- * Women's participation in religious life
- * Leadership roles
- * Equality in congregational worship
- * Langar System
- * Women and men serve equally
- * Symbol of social and gender equality

Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Islam	Sikhism
Spiritual Equality	Explicitly affirmed (Qur'ān 33:35)	Explicitly affirmed
Legal Rights	Well-defined and structured (e.g., inheritance, marriage)	Relatively less legalistic; more principle-based
Social Role	Encourages active and responsible participation	Promotes strong egalitarian participation
Scriptural Tone	Normative, legal, and guidance-oriented	Devotional, ethical, and spiritual

Refined Insight:

Islam presents a comprehensive framework that integrates legal structure with spiritual and ethical guidance, whereas Sikhism places a stronger emphasis on spiritual devotion and ethical egalitarianism with comparatively less formal legal structuring.

7. Convergence and Divergence

- * Convergence: Human dignity, Spiritual Equality, Rejection of oppression and exploitation



* Divergence: Islam → Legal framework, Sikhism → Spiritual and social equality

8. Advanced Qur'ānic Conception of Gender Justice

The Qur'ānic discourse on women's rights is not framed as a socio-cultural concession but as a divinely mandated ethical order rooted in justice ('adl) and reciprocity (mu'āmalah bi'l-ma'rūf). One of the most profound articulations of gender balance is expressed in the verse:

وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلِمْنَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ (Qur'ān 2:228)

This statement establishes a principle of reciprocal rights and obligations, suggesting that women possess rights equivalent in moral weight to those imposed upon them. The phrase bi'l-ma'rūf (according to what is just and customary) introduces a dynamic ethical framework that allows contextual interpretation without compromising divine justice (Nasr, 2003).

Furthermore, the Qur'ān universalizes moral accountability:

إِنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِّنْكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ بَعْضُكُم مِّنْ بَعْضٍ (Qur'ān 3:195)

The expression ba'ḍukum min ba'ḍ ("you are of one another") signifies ontological interdependence, dismantling hierarchical gender constructs and affirming a unified human identity.

9. Marriage, Consent, and Legal Autonomy in Islam

Islam redefined marriage (nikāḥ) as a contractual and ethical partnership rather than a patriarchal transaction. The necessity of female consent is firmly embedded in Prophetic teachings:

لَا تُنْكَحُ الْبِكْرُ حَتَّىٰ تُسْتَأْذَنَ (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Hadith:5136)

This Hadith explicitly prohibits forced marriages, establishing consent as a legal prerequisite.

The Qur'ān further protects women from coercion:

فَلَا تَعْضُلُوهُنَّ أَنْ يَنْكِحْنَ أَزْوَاجَهُنَّ (Qur'ān 2:232)

This verse addresses guardians, forbidding them from obstructing a woman's marital choices. Such injunctions reflect a sophisticated legal consciousness that prioritizes personal autonomy within a moral framework (Esposito, 2011).

10. Sikh Doctrine of Marriage and Gender Partnership

In Sikhism, marriage is conceptualized as a spiritual union grounded in equality and mutual devotion. The Guru Granth Sahib articulates this union as:

ਦੇਵੈ ਮਹਿਲਿ ਇਕੁ ਸੰਜੋਗੁ

This expression conveys the idea of two beings merging into a harmonious spiritual partnership, devoid of hierarchical dominance.

Another foundational verse states:



ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ

Analysis: This passage recognizes women as the origin and continuity of human existence, thereby dismantling any notion of inferiority. Sikh teachings thus embed gender equality within both metaphysical and social dimensions (Singh, 2018).

11. Economic Justice and Property Rights

Islamic law introduced unprecedented economic rights for women, granting them independent ownership and financial agency:

لِّلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَتَبْنَ (Qur'ān 4:32)

This verse affirms that women are entitled to the fruits of their labor, establishing economic autonomy as a fundamental right.

Additionally:

وَأَتُوا النِّسَاءَ صَدُقَاتِهِنَّ نِحْلَةً (Qur'ān 4:4)

The dowry (mahr) is described as a free gift, not a transactional payment, reinforcing women's financial independence.

In Sikh tradition, while legal codification is less pronounced, economic participation is normalized. Women actively contribute to communal and economic life, particularly within institutions such as the Langar, which symbolizes egalitarian distribution and participation.

12. Intellectual and Educational Empowerment

The pursuit of knowledge is a foundational principle in Islam:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ (Qur'ān 96:1)

This command is universal, extending to both men and women.

The intellectual contributions of women such as 'Ā'ishah (RA) demonstrate the practical realization of this principle. She functioned as a jurist, educator, and transmitter of knowledge, shaping early Islamic scholarship (Ahmed, 1992).

In Sikhism, education is similarly valorized:

ਵਿਦਿਆ ਵੀਚਾਰੀ ਤਾ ਪਰਉਪਕਾਰੀ

Knowledge is linked with ethical responsibility and social benefit, reinforcing an inclusive intellectual culture.

13. Protection from Abuse and Ethical Conduct

Islamic teachings categorically prohibit the mistreatment of women:

وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ (Qur'ān 4:19)

This directive mandates kindness and ethical conduct in marital relationships.

The Prophet ﷺ further emphasized:

خَيْرُكُمْ خَيْرُكُمْ لِأَهْلِهِ (Tirmadhi, Hadith:3895)

Moral excellence is thus measured by one's treatment of women.



In Sikh thought:

ਨਾਰੀ ਤੇ ਸਬ ਜਗ ਉਪਜੈ

This verse underscores the centrality of women in creation, making their oppression both socially and spiritually indefensible.

14. Women in Public and Religious Life

Islamic history demonstrates active female participation in public life:

- * Women participated in bay'ah (political allegiance)
- * Provided medical and logistical support in battles
- * Contributed to legal and theological discourse
- * Similarly, Sikhism institutionalizes gender inclusion:
- * Women participate in congregational worship (Sangat)
- * Leadership roles are not gender-restricted
- * No doctrinal basis for segregation

15. Contemporary Challenges and Misinterpretations

Despite strong scriptural foundations, challenges persist:

- * Cultural patriarchy overshadowing religious teachings
- * Selective textual interpretations
- * Institutional gaps in policy enforcement
- * These distortions often arise from socio-cultural practices rather than authentic religious doctrines (Ahmed, 1992; Esposito, 2011).

16. Policy Implications and Reform Strategies

To actualize the ethical vision of both traditions:

- * Develop gender-sensitive religious curricula
- * Promote interfaith dialogue on women's rights
- * Reform legal frameworks in line with authentic teachings
- * Encourage scholarly reinterpretation of classical texts
- * Such measures can bridge the gap between theological ideals and social realities.

17. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Islam and Sikhism reveals a profound convergence in their commitment to the protection of women's rights. Islam offers a comprehensive legal and ethical framework grounded in divine revelation, while Sikhism provides a spiritually egalitarian model emphasizing dignity and equality.

Both traditions affirm:

- * The intrinsic worth of women
- * Their spiritual and moral equality



- * Their right to social, economic, and intellectual participation
- * In a contemporary context marked by gender inequality, these shared principles offer a robust foundation for advancing global discourses on human rights and gender justice.

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