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Gender Discrimination in *The Bible*

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Abstract

Gender Discrimination is a social phenomenon where unfair treatment is meted out to a person based on gender. This inequality is caused due to gender bias or sexism. The treatment may be due to the distinctions with regard to biology, psychology and sociocultural norms. While some of the distinctions are empirically grounded others are social constructs. Gender roles can further lead to unequal treatment. Violence against women is a kind of gender discrimination and can limit their access to education, job opportunities and other facilities thereby perpetuating the cycle of gender inequality.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Bible, Women, Christianity, Old Testament

The freer that women become the freer men will be.
Because when you enslave someone, you are enslaved
- Louise Nevelson

The status of women, the oppression meted out to them, women's rights and much more have all been an issue debated for quite some time now. For long (and even today) women are valued not for their intelligence or capability, but merely for their fertility. No doubt, some women enjoy financial independence and can pass off without fear of being oppressed by their male counterparts; but do they have the right to decide is a query worth pondering. On the other side of the spectrum are the majority of women whose lives are marred by pain and fear. It is said that awareness is the key to the betterment of the lives. It is not that the women are not aware of their deplorable lot; the truth is, there is very little that they can do for themselves. The gross violation against the 'fair sex' or the misogynistic attitude shockingly lies within our religion, tradition and culture. However, this does not give sanction to condone the same because that would be tantamount to mutely approving and accepting the inhuman treatment meted out to women.

No country, community or society has anything different to say. In every religion what stands at the core, is the superior status of a man. In spite of the gender equity spoken in every religion, the pristine truth reveals the subordination of women. There are also facts (in every religion) which reveal gender discrimination and violence against women prevalent from time immemorial. Simone de Beauvoir very thoughtfully comments,

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being, for the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female. (*The Second Sex*, 1949).

What does Christianity speak about the status of women? Did the women enjoy superior or at least power on par? What does the Bible record regarding oppression among women? Does the religion celebrate and glorify gender equity?

Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament records the creation of the Universe. After creating the entire Universe, God created Adam and Eve to be master over his creation. First God created man 'in his own image' and named him Adam. Seeing that he was lonely and yearned for companionship, God created Eve from Adam's rib and they were happy in the Garden of Eden until they sinned by eating of the forbidden tree. Surprisingly and even more shocking is the fact that Adam's downfall to this day is credited to Eve. It is believed that she persuaded Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Again, some opine that Satan could not tempt Adam because he was intellectually superior and finding Eve a soft prey, played his cards well. This justification (although not genuine) has been an age-old excuse for the discrimination against women.

Further, God refers to both genders as 'man' (Genesis 5: 1-2) which throws light on the disparity in treatment and this contradicts the earlier views presented regarding the equality of status. Further in the book of Ephesians 5: 22-24 (from the New Testament) Paul in his letter to the people of Ephesus writes,

For a husband is in charge of his wife in the same way Christ is in charge of his body, the Church... so you wives must willingly obey your husbands in everything, just as the church obeys Christ.

Again, he continues that the wife must see to it that she deeply respects her husband - obeying, praising and honouring him. Here Paul was instructing the women regarding their duties towards their husbands which they were expected to do in great humility. What was asked of the women

was sheer obedience, complete surrender, and as though this was not sufficient, she was also instructed to praise and honour him (her husband).

Now was this not pampering the male ego to the hilt? Who says that male chauvinism did not prevail then?

While placing man synonymous with Christ, Paul was not only elevating the status of 'man' to a height ordained only for Christ, but he was also belittling women to the position of a slave or servant. *The Old Testament* records a number of atrocities committed against the women; and it is surprising that rape was considered to be a lesser crime than murder. A few passages which bring about the gender discrimination in a better light can be focused upon. Genesis chapter 38 records an incident when Judah comes to know that his widowed daughter-in-law, Tamar was pregnant. As suggested by others he considered her to be of loose morals and even suspected the child, she was carrying, to be a product of prostitution. In rage he declares *Bring her out and burn her* (Gen 38: 24).

However, when he realised that he was the father of the child Tamar was carrying, the verdict was reverted, and he took her as his wife; and she bore him twins. Here it was a case of law being made and marred as per the man's convenience. We do not find any trace of remorse or repentance in the character of Judah, but can definitely imagine what humiliation and fear Tamar must have faced in the perverted society. Any woman who violated the social norms (out of choice or force) was severely persecuted. She was either burned alive or stoned to death. A prostitute, in spite of favoring the men's carnal desires, was treated as an outcaste and even ex-communicated from the society.

There is yet another law as mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy, which vividly focuses on the dubious nature of the law-makers.

If two men are fighting and the wife of one intervenes to help her husband by grabbing the testicles of the other man, her hand shall be cut off without pity. (Deut 23:1)

The intervention of a woman to save her husband from another brutal man is definitely a graciously powerful act. During the chaos, it is only the safety of her husband that stands in her mind on a priority basis; but even at this time she is not credited for helping her husband but punished if accidentally she causes harm to the private part of the other man. She is not to be credited any sympathy but in the most barbaric manner punished. The very hand which rose to protect her

husband will be cut off. This punishment is significant from the male point of view as Deuteronomy 23:1 states,

If a man's testicles are crushed or his penis cut off, he shall not enter the sanctuary. It would not be wrong to say that the male genitals ranked sacrosanct in the minds of men, and this even at the cost of a woman's life.

Similarly, Exodus 22:18 says, "A Sorceress shall be put to death."

What is seen in all these verdicts is the lack of humanity. The society being built on a patriarchal setup, the norms were made by the hard-core men who had rocks in the place of their heart. This does not go to say that evils like sorcery or prostitution should have been propagated or dealt by with a blind eye, but definitely there could have been a little more forbearance, human outlook and sympathetic spirit while dealing with these so-called proliferators of law. This had its influence on America where in the early ages the 'infamous' Salem witch trials resulted in the death and prosecution of several people.

The Book of Leviticus, Chapter 12, instructs in detail regarding the dos and don'ts that a woman is supposed to strictly adhere to after she bears a child. After delivery, the woman is declared 'ceremonially defiled' or 'ceremonially impure'. During this period, she is not supposed to touch anything sacred nor enter the Tabernacle. These restrictions follow suit even during her menstruation. After the stipulated days, she has to make atonement for herself, which is done on her behalf by the priest. As she is not supposed to enter the Tabernacle, she only stands at the entrance and the priest makes atonement for her, so that she will be ceremonially pure again. A closer look at this proves that there is no scientific base in declaring the woman who has just given birth to a child as impure, defiled or unclean. Being a biological process, it is true that she needs good nourishment and rest so as to regain her strength and nurse the child. It would not be wrong to say that the male dominators had even made the child bearing process dirty, traditionally rigorous and religious bound.

Another horrible crime is recorded in the Book of Judges. Sexual abuse or gang rape is not something of recent times, but can be traced to ancient times. There were a few travellers who could not find any place to rest at night. Finally, they were invited by an old man, who took them home for supper and rest. Soon, a group of sex perverts arrived and knocking at the door yelled at

the old man to send the guest out in order to satisfy their physical urge. The old man stepping out said,

No, my brother, don't do such a dastardly act, for he is my guest. Here, take my virgin daughter and this man's wife. I'll bring them out and you can do whatever you like to them-but don't do such a thing to this man.

It is interesting to note that sodomy was a greater crime than rape and the honour of a man was considered more significant than that of a woman, no matter even if she happened to be one's daughter or wife. Preaching the word of God or spreading the good news was something assigned to the men. Women were considered incapable of this great work. Jesus Christ had a few women working to spread his word and even *The Bible* mentions female leaders like Judith, Deborah and Queen Esther working to save Israel from disaster. Despite this, *The Old Testament* does not favour the 'fair sex'.

Paul in his letter to Timothy says, "I never let women teach men or lord it over them. Let them be silent in your church meeting.

He further justifies himself by saying,

Because God made Adam first and afterwards, he made Eve. And it was not Adam who was fooled by Satan, but Eve, and sin was the result. So, God sent pain and suffering to women when their children are born, but he will save their souls if they trust in him, living quiet, good and loving lives (1 Timothy 2: 12-15)

Here it becomes clear that women were not encouraged to teach or preach. Was there a law preventing the woman from being ordained? Were women encouraged into the ministry? By avoiding them in the mainstream culture, were the so called religious big wigs aiding to the suppression of women. However, there is evidence that this discrimination was removed by the Christian nations during the late 19th century.

The same views are expressed in the words of Tertullian (c 160 225 AD) the prolific early Christian author from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. He was the first Christian author to produce an extensive corpus of Latin Christian literature. Known as the father of Latin Christianity, he originated and advocated new theology to the early church. He has often been criticized for being misogynistic on the basis of the contents in his '*De Cultu Feminarum*' section 1.1 part (trans-C.W. Marx). He writes,

Do you not know that you are Eve? The judgment of God upon this sex lives on in this age, therefore necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are the gateway of the devil, you are the one who unseals the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back on the divine laws; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting. You easily destroyed the image of god, Adam. Because of what you deserve, that is, death, even the son of God had to die.

Shockingly, Tertullian blames women for the downfall of man and the death of Christ. Totally prejudiced, he seems to be writing with a preconceived notion and his hatred for women seems to cross all limits. It is even stranger and shocking that even the great philosopher Aristotle found women inferior and defective due to her inability to produce semen (the seed of life). He found men superior by virtue of their greater intellect. The bias and prejudiced social set-up becomes evident through such misogynistic views.

Another significant law designed, focused and regulated women's virginity as something of prime importance. The term 'virgin' carried great reverence and this can be seen in many passages from the Bible. The Old Testament prophesized the birth of Jesus Christ for which a virgin would be chosen. Isaiah 7:14 states,

All right then, the Lord himself will choose the sign- a child shall be born to a virgin. Only a virgin, pure in morals and life could mother the saviour of the world.

It is very interesting to note that the Hebrew version of the Bible does not refer to the term 'virgin' but 'almah' which means a 'young woman'. It is quite possible that the prominent law makers and authors of different books in the Bible must have conveniently changed the word 'almah' to 'virgin' to suit the expectations of the 'male-centric' society, as the term 'virgin' carries along with it different shades of meaning such as purity, innocence, morality, virtuous and much more.

The Book of Matthew (New Testament) states,

Listen! The virgin shall conceive a child! (1:22-23)

It is quite likely that the mistranslated or misinterpreted term from the Isaiah version was turned into a worldwide belief. If it's an error, the question is where did it come from? The answer is definitely not from God, but from fallible men. Throughout the Bible, different passages from the Old Testament reveal gender discrimination and a deplorable lot of the female community. In addition to the myriad restrictions placed on women, a few would be worth mentioning here.

- Unmarried women had to live in their father's home and could not move away.

- On the other hand, married women could not move away from their husband's home.
- Women had to wear a veil. She could not inherit or hold property.
- Her husband was her master and she was no better than a mute slave.

However, a slight improvement in the status of women was seen with the passage of time. Women shot into prominence and a few names like Martha, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla, Aquila, Claudia need a special mention as they worked stoically in the spread of Christianity. But this was something of the more recent times and it was more of women's involvement in political and social movements that gradually brought about a reasonable improvement in the lives and status of women.

In conclusion, it would be worthwhile to focus upon the words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who very sarcastically talks about the languishing women and their anguish and agony, all which she (mis) credits to the laws of *The Bible*.

The Bible teaches that women brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity, a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection. She was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire ...

However, the status of women has improved a lot during recent times. Women, today are looked upon as role models and play a positive role in helping the family serve God. Earlier women who were kept away from church are now provided equality at church. Christian women are not to be seen as mere wives and mothers but as active participants in the activities of the church.

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