

Gender, Power and Religion: An Intimate Interface

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Abstract: We are in the age of dualities, dichotomies, discriminations, exclusions and marginalizations. Species biasness (human-nonhuman), racial (black-white), sexual (male-female-transgender), caste discrimination (Brahmana-Ksatriya-Vaisya-Sudra) and male chauvinism are the order of the day. Gender plays a crucial role in the lives of both men and women. Being a woman, she is already excluded and if she is a dalit woman, she is doubly excluded. She is leveled as the **second sex**. Neither her voice is heard in the family nor in the community. A philosophic gaze points to the intricate relationship between gender, power and religion and their interconnectedness. Gender roles and power dynamics have long been intertwined with religious ideologies, shaping societal structures, norms, and individual identities. This paper examines how religious beliefs and practices both reinforce and challenge gender norms and power hierarchies. The intersection of gender, power, and religion is multifaceted, encompassing diverse manifestations such as the exclusion of women from religious leadership roles, the enforcement of gender-specific dress codes, the entry of specific gender to the sanctum sanctorum and the regulation of reproductive rights. Furthermore, religious institutions often serve as sites of both resistance and perpetuation of gender inequalities, reflecting broader power struggles within society. Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of critically examining the intersections of gender, power, and religion to understand the complexities of social inequality and to foster more inclusive and equitable societies. It tries to show that how religion is more misunderstood than understood regarding women. By shedding light on these dynamics, it provides insights for scholars, policymakers, practitioners and ethical thinkers seeking to address issues of gender justice and religious pluralism in contemporary contexts.

Key Words: Gender, Humanism, Power, Religion, Women Empowerment

Introduction

People are categorised by sexuality or culture. These labels are given to individuals based on their sexual orientation or, in certain cases, based on qualities that have been built by

culture.¹ Individuals can be assigned a particular biological sex, yet it is also possible for their self-identified gender to not correspond with this assigned sex. Gender of an individual may occasionally be assumed by depending on cultural norms. These cultural norms may include the individual's outer appearance, body shape and size, physical activity, and other factors of a similar nature². When it comes to the formation of an individual's gender identity, psychology plays a significant impact. One can also build his/her gender identity by adopting particular behaviors, such as speaking a particular language, wearing particular attire, and partaking in activities that are typically associated with a given gender within a particular community. When it comes to the fields of feminist anthropology and psychology, Anne Fausto-Sterling employs the term "embodiment" to characterize this occurrence.³

It is possible for gender, which covers the set of roles, behaviours, and attitudes that cultures consider to be proper for women and men, to act as the source of power dynamics, religious activities and the phenomenon that results from them. The manifestation of these power dynamics can take place in a variety of contexts, ranging from the private sector of the household to the highest echelons of political and religious decision-making.

Distinction between Gender and Sex

The terms "sex" and "gender" are frequently used interchangeably by a large number of individuals because of their conceptual nuances. Their distinct meanings and uses in different contexts help us in avoiding any philosophical problems. The term "sex" is utilized in the process of classifying an individual's biological assignment, which is frequently determined by gathering data from scientific research.⁴ It is usual practice to establish this biological determination at the moment of a person's birth. It is a normal practice for medical professionals to determine the sex of a patient by examining prenatal photographs or by performing a physical examination of the genitalia of the baby.⁵ For this determination, the idea that gender and sex are usually equivalent continues to be considered fundamental.⁶ When an individual does not fit within the conventional definitions of "male" or "female," this is when the problem begins. Certain

¹David Valentine and Riki Anne Wilchins, *One Percent on the Burn Chart: Gender, Genitals, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude* (Duke University: Duke University Press, 1997): 217

²Trish Gorely, Rachel Holroyd and David Kirk "Muscularity, the Habitus and the Social Construction of Gender: Towards a Gender-Relevant Physical Education", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24 (4) (Taylor & Francis Online, 2003): 429–448

³Anne Fausto-Sterling "Gender/Sex, Sexual Orientation, and Identity Are in the Body: How Did They Get There?" *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56 (4–5) (2019), 529–555

⁴Anne Fausto-Sterling *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, Basic Books, 2000): 1–29.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

individuals working in the field of medicine are currently employing the **Karyotype method** to examine the chromosomes of individuals in order to ascertain the respective biological sexes of those individuals.⁷ On the other hand, there is a particular group of people who believe that the term "gender" will predominantly refer to psycho-social qualities rather than other factors. They argue that gender is not defined by scientific knowledge but rather by the expressions and behaviors that we exhibit towards one another.⁸ Even many people identify gender with women. But gender does not mean women only; it is about men and women, their respected identities, their representation and their mutually interrelated social worlds. To make the distinction more explicit, it can be said that sex is natural and biological whereas gender is social and cultural. In other words, gender is a social construction only. Simone de Beauvoir gave the existential mantra that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determine the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between, male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.⁹ She further said that woman is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute-she is the other.¹⁰ This clearly indicates that man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. This is how gender discrimination continues to fuel the binary distinction between male and female, femininity and masculinity and their associated roles, duties and responsibilities.

Formation of Gender Identity

When people talk about their identities, they take into consideration how they perceive themselves as well as the similarities they have with other people. Personal experiences that are consistent with the experiences that are commonly linked with a given gender are what are meant to be referred to as gender identification situations. How a person perceives himself and interacts with other people is significantly impacted by their preferred gender identification. The process of obtaining knowledge about the fundamental aspects of being a particular gender from the beginning is known as gender

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex*, Vol-II, (France, Vintage Books, 1949): 283

¹⁰ Ibid, 6

intensification. According to the gender intensification theory, an increase in the amount of pressure placed on children to comply with socially accepted gender norms leads to a greater distinction of gender roles between various genders.

Role of Gender & Politics

Power and gender are intimately intertwined and cannot be seen in isolation from one another given the current state of affairs in society.¹¹There is a connection between gender and power because power can be acquired, utilized, and displayed in a variety of different ways. Power inequalities explain gender differences in knowledge, behaviour and attitude on the part of the individuals. Gender parity, stereotypes and patriarchy are the outcomes of gender politics which are based on the principles of subordination, domination and inequality. This is corroborated by Aristotle when he said that women possess lesser reasoning than men. He further said that men are rulers and women are ruled. It could be argued that Aristotle debar women from the highest position of governance. It is said that women and men exhibit distinct levels of power motivation which is supported by facts from both history and society. Throughout the course of Western history, there is no question that women have had fewer opportunities than men to reach various forms of authority. This is a fact that cannot be denied. The notion that men have a greater predisposition to seek power and achieve it, whilst women do not have the same level of excitement in this endeavour, is one of the ideas that are believed by most people. It is also believed that there are differences between men and women in terms of how they gain, keep, and exhibit power.¹²Women are not allowed to exercise their right to vote for a pretty long period. They are not equally paid for equal work. After a long battle, feminist movement as a socio-political movement demands for certain rights and gender equality in all walks of women's lives. The different waves of feminism demand for right to vote, social rights (Anti-discrimination), reproductive rights, right to be treated equally, right to property and many more. Increasing the number of women who hold positions of power has been demonstrated to contribute to a reduction of occurrences of corruption. Women are less likely to engage in corrupt practices and are less likely to advocate the acceptance of bribes. This is because women are less likely to corrupt themselves.

Women in leadership Roles

¹¹J.D.Yoder & A.S. Kahn“Towards a feminist Understanding of women and power”, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 16(4), (1992):381-388

¹² D.G.Winter&N.B.Barenbaum“Responsibility and the Power Motive in Women and Men”, *Journal of Personality*, 53(2) (1985):335-355

The term "women in positions of power" refers to individuals who hold high-ranking positions in organizations or the government, positions in which they have authoritative roles, influence and responsibility. There has been a persistent imbalance in the distribution of power between the sexes throughout the course of human history. Women have historically been underrepresented in positions of power and influence, whereas men have traditionally occupied the majority of these positions. This difference in representation has persisted throughout history.¹³ Initially, men were labeled as bread earners and women as caregivers. The debate between public-private, mental-material, reason-emotion etc. was addressed by the second wave feminists (Carol Hanish etc.) in the slogan "The personal is political"¹⁴No issue/problem is personal. All personal problems are political problems. Hence, there is no personal solution rather collective action for collective solution. An increase in the number of significant positions that women are taking on across a wide range of human endeavours has been brought about as a direct consequence of the progress that has been made towards gender equality.¹⁵Nature maintains the balance but the imbalance is purely manmade or because of intervention by men for their self-interest. Hence, women must be included in societal structures in a manner that is both accurate and proportionate within those institutions for humankind to continue to thrive and survive. Further, the most significant obstacle that prevents women from advancing in their jobs for top positions in corporations is the multiple interruptions that are associated with parenting. The lack of women in positions of authority not only shows adversity and a lack of empowerment, but it also contributes to the continuation of gender stereotypes, patriarchy and impedes the advancement of gender equality. The lack of women in authority positions leads to the lack of women empowerment.

Place of Authority

In the context of a particular profession or industry, the term "occupational power"¹⁶refers to the ability to exert authority or influence on subordinates within that profession or sector. The positions that are part of this category can range from those of significant national leaders or chief executive officers (CEOs) of businesses to those of club members or members of very small, informal groupings.¹⁷ The government,

¹³N.Hartssock "Foucault on power: a theory for women?", *Feminism/postmodernism*, (1990)162

¹⁴Alice E. Ginsberg *The Evolution of American Women's Studies: reflections on triumphs, controversies and change*(edt) (New York, Palgrave Macmillan,20008):69

¹⁵ C.Cockburn *In the way of women: Men's resistance to sex equality in organisations*(Cornell University Press,2018) 18

¹⁶J. Thornton "Positions of Power", *Mechanical Engineering*.132 (1) (2010): 42-45

¹⁷Susan Griffin "Occupational therapists and the concept of power: A review of the literature". *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*48 (1) (2008): 24-34

industry, business, science, academia, media, non-governmental organisations and other sectors of society are all examples where formal settings are prevalent. There are also many additional domains in which these settings are frequent.

The Academics

Within the realm of academia, there exists a significant disparity between the recognition and achievements of female academics and those of their male peers.¹⁸ There is a huge gender gap in several departments, particularly in the subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), where the number of males significantly surpasses the number of females. This is especially true in the STEM fields.¹⁹ Women obtaining tenure and advancing to higher-ranking or more prominent positions is lower than the male employees achieving the same goals simultaneously. Most of the tedious works related to academia are assigned to women whereas women are the least represented in the work related to finance and decision making. The participation and representation of women in Higher Educational Institutions is still shaped by glass ceilings, invisible barriers, unspoken biases and strategical confinements. As of 2025 data published in New Indian Express dated 24-08-2025, Secretary General of AIU (Association of Indian Universities) declared that 120 universities have women VCs out of 1073 universities. It shows only 11.18% of universities in India have women Vice Chancellors.²⁰ It is for this reason that, even though there has been a marginal rise in the number of women being hired for academic positions, the majority of this expansion has been seen in lower-level positions.²¹

To promote the cause of gender equality in the future, it is vital to increase the number of women in academic institutions. This might be one of the reasons for which the Fourth - Wave Feminism(2012-present); popularly known as Digital Feminism maintains a critical approach in order to analyse digital technologies, percentage of women representation, policies and algorithms from a feminist perspective. However, we cannot shy away from the fact that all men are not gender insensitive and all women are not gender sensitive.

Additional elements

Beyond the gender difference, there are a great number of additional factors that contribute to the differentiation in the distribution of power. These factors include, but

¹⁸ S. M. Clark & M. Corcoran "Perspectives in the professional socialization of women faculty: A case of accumulative disadvantage?" *Journal of Higher Education*(1986)

¹⁹ M. O. T. Story & W. I. Academia "Women Faculty Make Little Progress" *Education* 83(44) (2005): 38-39.

²⁰ S. Lalitha, "Not Fair: Only 11 percent women Vice Chancellors in Indian Universities", *The New Indian Express*(24-08-2025)

²¹ J. A. Winkler "Focus Section: Women in Geography in the 21st Century: Faculty Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion: Barriers for Women", *The Professional Geographer* 52(4) (2000):737-750.

are not limited to, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and others. When they are considered in conjunction with gender differences, these factors become even more important than they already were. According to the conclusions of a study that was published in the *Journal of the National Association of Social Workers*, the "simultaneous impact of racism and sexism" hurts the mental well-being of individuals and restricts the options that are open to them during their lifetime.²²

Reservations for Women as an Equity Measure

Adoption of some equity measures may bring equality in the society. Some nations have decided to establish reservation policies that require a certain minimum number of women to hold elected posts/jobs within the government. Overall, the reservation system has been successful in expediting the inclusion of a higher number of women into governmental institutions, which has led to an increase in the prevalence of female representation. When it comes to meeting reservation standards, several countries that have effectively adopted reservation systems have recently outperformed countries that have traditionally been more gender-representative. This is the case in terms of satisfying quota requirements.²³ On the other hand, reservation systems are not completely free of the possibility of negative consequences, and there is an ongoing debate on the efficiency of representation.

India

An important component that was introduced by the new Companies Act of India is that every defined type of company in India must have at least one female member on its Board of Directors. The provision in question can be interpreted as a revolutionary step taken by the Government of India to empower women working in the corporate sector of India. This would ultimately result in the enhancement and encouragement of their contributions to the economic development of the country. Women, in comparison to men, had more restricted access to food, which engages them in doing some unethical practices. As a direct result of this, a significant number of women and girls who were living in poverty at the time ended up going to brothels. Govt. of India has already taken some initiatives in this regard. One-third of all seats for women in Lok Sabha, State Lagislative Assembly, Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, including those reserved for SCs and STS by introducing 33% reservations for girls/women. A deep analysis of the issue will show that how men are taking all the political decisions in the name of women. The implementation of right to property for

²²L.M. Gutierrez Working with Women of Color: An Empowerment Perspective, *Social Work*,35(2) (1990):149-153

²³Alice Kang "The Global Impact of Quotas on the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation" *Comparative Political Studies*. 41 (3) (2008): 338–361

girl child is highly questionable because as a male member naturally inherit the property; the same is not the case with the female folk. She has to run from pillar to post for her legitimate claim.

Religion and Women

Human history, culture and literature are best understood only in association with religion. Religion is not a mere aggregate of abstract set of beliefs but also something practiced by both men and women. The individuals particularly women and their social identities are both impacted by this encounter. At one time, the relationship between gender and religion might serve to strengthen and maintain gender roles, while at other times it can serve to constrain gender roles from occurring. It is abundantly evident that religious beliefs and rituals can both enforce specific gender norms and create opportunities for participants to express their gender. However, it is a fact that very little importance has been given to women community and their representation in socio-religious affairs throughout history.

There is not a single definition of religion rather multiple ones. There have been more than 3000 religions practiced across the Globe. We broadly divide religion into

- Semitic /Abrahamic Religion
- Oriental/Indic Religion

It would be really very difficult to see the position of women in each religion. Women and religion are a subfield of religious studies that focuses on the roles that women play and the experiences that they have within various religious traditions. This includes both the analysis of women's participation in religious practices as well as the assessment of female gender roles throughout the history of religion. The issue of attention that is taken into consideration is the utilization of religion as a patriarchal instrument to elevate the position and power of men over women.²⁴ In addition, the notions of religious beliefs depict gender roles in their respective organizations.²⁵ Therefore, feminists in general and religious feminists in particular examine and interrogate discriminatory and unequal practices against women within religion, question why and how the rituals and practices that women engage in are rendered unnoticed.

In Judaism, there is the mention of Adam and Eve²⁶. The first couple was put in the paradise or the Garden of Eden. They have to face the consequences when Adam ate the

²⁴Linda Woodhead, Christopher Partridge and Hiroko Kawanami *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (edt) (New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016):173

²⁵ Veenat Arora and Anil Kumar Mishra "Women and Religion: Portrayal of Women in Christianity and Islam", *The Journal of Social Understanding*. 6 (1) (2016):111–146

²⁶David Noel Freedman *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed.)(Eerdmans, 2000):18-19

fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Both of them thrown to this world and in this way we all are the fallen angels/animals. In some sense, woman is considered to be temptress who tempted Adam to eat the fruit. She is the cause of all forms of suffering. This is one of the perspectives of women. Further, the Jews women completely lose any control over her property and earnings to her husband as soon as she gets married. This might be one of the reasons for which feminist as a movement takes place in the western context.

Christianity, the prominent Semitic religion, where it has been said that “A women shall not wear a man’s garment nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.”²⁷ Women are always depicted in relation to men and the religious authorities. In the Genesis, it is said that “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female, created he them.”²⁸ The idea that men and women are on equal footing in the eyes of God is a fundamental principle that is central to the religion of Islam.

Hinduism, the Indic religion, is not an exception to this practice. Gender equality was a practice in the early Vedic period. There were Brahmabadinis²⁹(Bidusi) like Gargi, Maitreyi, Alapa, Ghosa, Swaha, Lopamudra etc. who wrote commentaries on different Upanisads. They were jivanmuktas. Gradually, gender parity became visible in all the Indic religions, namely, Jainism, Buddhism and Sanatana Dharma. Gender as a category and gendering as a social practice becomes central to all religions. It promotes patriarchy and gender roles. In Jainism, it is mentioned that women cannot obtain liberation without being born as a men in next life.³⁰ There is also a mention that women approached Buddha including his mother to give entry to them in embracing monkhood. There by, Bikhuni Sanghavas organized and came into existence. Buddha have taken a feminist approach in the modern sense of the term and tried to emancipate women from the clutches of male dominion. However, logical analysis of some concepts like ‘Ardhangini’ (Better-half), ‘Siva-Sakti’, ‘Ardha Nareswara (Skandha Purana)” etc. explicate the importance of both male and female. Both male and female energy are required for creation. The Supreme deity is both the father and the mother at the same time. Further, these concepts emphasized upon the dissolution of the sectarian practices and the adoption of a totalistic worldview. Science also proves that all men and women possess cross elements. These concepts best describe the coexistence of men & women working for the benefit of the Universe. Further, the function of a Hindu woman within the context of the family and community has experienced significant shifts over the course of history. Most of these shifts have taken place as a result of several different

²⁷Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 22:5

²⁸ Cited in Matthew 19:4 and Mark 10:6

²⁹ Cited in “*Great Hindu Philosophy-Vedic Women: Loving, Learned, Lucky!*”, Retrieved 2006-12-24

³⁰ C.D. Sharma *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2003):68

circumstances like patriarchal attitude, power game, and repeated invasions by foreign invaders, Colonial rules, Cultural impositions, lack of education and many more. We can cite the concept of 'double blindness' by saying "Religion is gender blind and gender is religion blind."³¹ Who (religion/patriarchy) is influencing whom is a million dollar question.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interface between gender, power, and religion is a complex and dynamic terrain that encompasses historical legacies, contested interpretations, and ongoing struggles for equality and justice. Religious beliefs and practices have both reflected and perpetuated gender hierarchies, while gender dynamics and power relations have influenced religious institutions and interpretations. Efforts to challenge patriarchal norms, promote gender equality, and foster intersectional perspectives within religious contexts are essential for creating more inclusive and equitable religious communities. Religion is not to be treated as an obstacle rather an opportunity to understand the feminists and to interpret the female forces, their inner fears and realize their inner worth. It's time to re-understand religion, re-interpret scriptures, re-analyse religious concepts/aphorisms, continued dialogue, advocacy, and activism are needed to create religious spaces that affirm the dignity, agency, and equality of all individuals, regardless of gender or other social identities.

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³¹ U.King & Tina Beattie *Gender, Religion And Diversity – Cross Cultural Perspectives* (Ed.) (Continuum, London,2005):67

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