

Affirming 'her' Rights

A Review of Sacred Texts by Sribala, Henry
Martyn Institute, Hyderabad, India

Major Issues

Every day, millions of women and girls worldwide experience violence. This abuse takes many forms, including intimate physical and sexual partner violence, female genital mutilation, child and forced marriage, sex trafficking, and rape.

Identity crises

What is identity?

Can identity change over time? Or is it fixed?

Can identity be lost? If so, can it be recovered?

How can it be recovered? Can one's past experiences affect one's present or future identity?

What roles family, school, church, temple, mosque, religion, society and cultural values play in the formation of one's identity?
What is God's identity?

These questions challenge the world of girls today.

Women Roles in the Holy Scriptures

VEDAS

Women played a vital role and had greatest respect in Vedas.

Atharva 11.5.18: *Brahmcharya Sukta,*

It is emphasized that girls too should train themselves as students and only then enter into married life. Emphasizes that girls should receive the same level of training as boys.

Chapter 1: Women in Vedic Dharma, Page 8

“Girls should train themselves to become complete scholars and youthful through Brahmcharya and then enter married life “

BIBLE

Bible says that the children are gift of God. Since the Bible was written by male writers, we find androcentric language throughout the Bible. It doesn't mean that God is partial with girl children and it is only problem with the use of language.

“Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
Your sons [sic] will be like olive shoots around your table.”
(Pslam 128:3)

“Then our sons in their youth will be like well nurtured plants,
and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace”
(Psalm 144: 12)

“If she is a wall, we will build towers of silver on her,
If she is door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar”
(Song of Solomon 8:9)

The Bible treats girls with dignity and honour and their life is very precious. God created human beings as male and female and in his own image. The difference between male and female are only biological. God has endowed them with equal potentialities, wisdom and knowledge. Hence, both are entrusted with responsibility to protect God’s creation.
(Genesis 1:26-28)

QURAN

On the Day of Judgement: “when the infant girl buried alive is asked, ‘for what crime she was slain?’ ” Sura 81:8-9

“You shall not kill your children for fear of want. We will provide for them and for you. To kill them is a great sin”. Sura 17:31

“Say: Come, I will tell you what your Lord has made binding on you: that you shall serve no other gods besides Him: that you shall show kindness to your parents; that you shall not kill your children because you cannot support them (We provide for you and for them)”; Sura 6:151

Social and Economic Status of Women in Scriptures

Vedas

The Vedic tradition has held a high regard for the qualities of women, and has retained the greatest respect within its tradition as seen in the honour it gives for the Goddess, who is portrayed as the feminine embodiment of important qualities and powers. These forms include

Vedic saying, "**where the women are happy, there will be prosperity**"

In the *Vedas*, when a woman is invited into the family through marriage, she enters "**as a river enters the sea**" and "**to rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family.**" (*Atharva-Veda* 14.1.43-44)

Rigveda 7.78.3: We can see brilliant women enlightening the society with their noble qualities right in front of us. They have given birth to the sun of knowledge and fire of noble actions. **Due to their glory, darkness of ignorance, sins and negativity is destroyed.**

In ancient India the Sanskrit words used by the husband for the wife were ***Pathni*** (the one who leads the husband through life), ***Dharmapathni*** (the one who guides the husband in dharma) and ***Sahadharmacharini*** (one who moves with the husband on the path of dharma--righteousness and duty). This is how ancient Vedic culture viewed the partnership of husband and wife.

BIBLE

God demands equal respect, dignity and honour indiscriminative of gender. He is the God of Justice. The Bible records the instances of justice done to innocent young girls.

God did justice to young girls who claimed their father's inheritance. According to the tradition, if a person dies without sons, his name will be disappeared from the clan. So Zelophehad's five daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah Milcah and Tirzah boldly approached Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders and whole assembly to claim their share of property from their father's relatives. (Numbers 27; 1-4, Joshua17:3-4)

They said, “Why should our father’s name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father’s relatives.” (Num. 27: 4)

So Moses took their case before God and God said, “ What Zelophehad’s daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property an inheritance among their father’s relatives and turn their father’s inheritance over to them. And say to the Israelites, “If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughters....” (Num.27: 8)

It is evident that God valued girl children He has upheld their dignity and secured their future through His clear direction on inheritance to girls.

Quran

Rights of Children including Girl Child in Islam

1. Children have a right to food, clothing and shelter and to be looked after until they grow up and are able to take care of themselves.
2. They are also entitled to love, affection and respect of their parents.
3. They are entitled to equal treatment in terms of financial gifts amongst siblings. Special treatment can be accorded to a handicapped child, without violation of the equality principle amongst siblings.

- 4) Children, including female child have a right to education. This comes out very clearly in the following saying of Prophet Muhammad: “A father gives his children nothing better than a good education”.(Sayings)
- 5) It is the responsibility of the parents to help children get married and settle down.
- 6) Parents are also encouraged to provide well for the children. According to a saying of the Prophet “It is better to provide adequately for children in inheritance, to leave their children were provided (financially) than to leave them in poverty”. (Sayings)

**Messages by the scriptures to bring
changes in the society to up lift the
women**

Hinduism / Veda

If society needs to be prosperous and happy, one cannot sideline the imminent need to restore women to highest pedestal of respect, make them leaders of our social awakening and surrender to the glory of the motherly force.

May we respect the woman always and may she guide us always towards bliss in form of Usha – the sunrise.

Woman possesses more internal and emotional energy. It is not without reason that women are identified with *shakti* in Vedic civilization. If women are suppressed, this *shakti* will not be passed on to the family and society at large, thus weakening all of them.

It emphasises that to bring back the glory of woman which can curtail the evils that are prevailing in the present scenario, which will put back our society into a bigger transformation.

Christianity / BIBLE

Girl children need to be educated on these grounds so that their identity will be formulated as powerful identity.

Liberation happens at physical, personal, social, political and spiritual level.

Life is not only related with physical needs but also has to do with knowledge, feelings and emotions which are also dependent on the physical being just as the evaluative functions of the mind and that plays a significant role in forming the identity in the community.

The power of Jesus to empower others is the best paradigm for women and girl children. An empowerment took place in the life of the woman with the flow of blood (Matt. 9:20-22, Mk. 5: 25-34, Lk. 8:43-48) in the New Testament. The vision and goal of Jesus is to free the people from all the bondages that lead to stress.

Islam / Quran

- Imperative for Indian Muslim women to reclaim their right to religious knowledge, enter the discourse on the shariah and challenge their historic marginalization from religious knowledge as well as its discriminatory interpretations.
- The *Qura'nic* mandate of justice, benevolence and compassion although inviolable as values, they nevertheless undergo changes in expression and application from one age to another. One needs to exercise the option of '*Ijtehaad*' (Consensus) for the women's rights as is enshrined in divine sources.

- The Muslim community should assume the onus of transforming from within Muslim Personal Law.
- Though girls' madrasas are providing yeomen services to the masses, by imparting knowledge of *Qura'n*, *Hadiths* and *Fiqh*, it is imperative for all Muslim women to interpret and read *Qura'n* and Hadith (Sahiy'en) in their own mother tongue. As Fatima Mernissi proposes, one has to deal not only with "Occasions of revelation" but also "Occasions for revelations".

**Legal Aspect:
India – Religion – Child Rights**

- Faith plays a big part in constructing cultural, sociological and personal behaviour
- Around 99 Percent Indians choose to label themselves as belonging to a particular religion according to Census reports.
- Faith has a critical role to play in the advancement of basic human rights for children
- With a multitude of faiths like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism and many more tribal faiths, India is a country made of people with strong identification to their faiths.

Religion / superstition – Violation of Child Rights

Harmful practices based on tradition, culture, religion or superstition” cover many or even most violations of children’s rights. For Ex:

- Foeticide & Infanticide – Forced Abortions – Belief – Son will Give Moksha
- Denial of education to girls & Formal Education
- Excessive use of child imprisonment -
- Segregation of children with disabilities
- discriminatory treatment of minorities
- Corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment
- preferential feeding and care of male children

- Ritualized physical harm
- Violent and degrading initiation rites
- Forced marriage and early marriage
- “Honour” crimes; “retribution” acts of violence
(where disputes between different groups are taken out on children of the parties involved)
- Dowry-related death and violence
- Jogini System – Sex Slaves

INDIAN Laws were framed accordingly...

- The Pre-Conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994
- The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995.
- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986
- The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986
- The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000.
- The Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005
- Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006
- Right to Education Act -2009
- Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act – 2012
- Hindu Adoption & Maintenance Act - 1956

International Legislation

- UNCRC - Article 24(3) (the child's right to health and health services) requires: "States parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children."
- CEDAW – Art 5 - "To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women;
- Art 16 – men & women should have similar Rights to enter into marriage & with full consent; freely to choose a spouse; same rights and responsibilities during marriage & during parenting and sharing child's responsibilities.

UNCRC - reflects values shared with the world's major religious tradition

- A fundamental belief in the dignity of the child.
- An emphasis on the family as the best place for bringing up children.
- High priority given to children and the idea that all members of society have rights and duties towards them.
- A holistic notion of the child and a comprehensive understanding of his or her physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs.

What are the Roles of Faith Based Organizations?

- With their extraordinary moral authority and power, faith-based organisations (FBOs) are able to influence thinking, foster dialogue, and set priorities for members of their communities.
- FBOs provide with the 'reach' to inaccessible areas; help make inroads into all sections of society across classes.
- Faith-based communities contribute social, spiritual and material to address needs of the most vulnerable children and families.
- Partnerships with FBOs also allow space for innovations in communicating and advocating on issues related to children. Ex: UNICEF & Art of Living.

UNICEF Says...

'When child rights efforts are grounded in the protective aspects of religious beliefs and practices in a community that encourages and enriches the spiritual and religious life of each child, the impact can be far-reaching.'



Sarada Devi

If you want peace, do not find fault with others. Rather, see your own faults. Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own.



Mother Teresa

“I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things.”



Rabia Basri

Indeed your days are numbered, for when one day passes; a significant portion of your life has passed away. And when that portion has fled, soon it will come to pass that your whole life has disappeared. As you know this, strive always towards the performance of good deeds.

Thank you