

## **Belief Systems**

**To what extent is the empowerment or status of women impacted by prevailing religious beliefs?**

**Island School**

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### **Introduction**

Throughout the centuries, the status of women has always been influenced by a multitude of factors. Recently, the alarming, widespread reports of sexual abuse have highlighted the importance of this issue in today's society. In order to fully understand the extent of this issue, I will be exploring the issue from a variety of viewpoints. The report will focus upon how the major religions of the world -- Islam, Buddhism and Christianity may have had an impact on this issue. In this research report, I will be exploring to what extent is the empowerment or status of women can be impacted by prevailing religious beliefs, as well as the solutions to the problems I have highlighted in my report.

### **Causes and Consequences**

#### **Islam**

The religion of Islam has always been stigmatized as being patriarchal and sexist, but is this really the truth? The Quran states that men should be "in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)." Domestic abuse, however, is condemned in the Quran, and the prophet Muhammad had said: "Give her (your wife) food when you take food, clothe her when you clothe yourself, do not revile her face, and do not beat her."<sup>1</sup> This shows that although women in Islam traditionally are worth less than men, they are still to be respected, and treated well.

However, some groups such as the Taliban, ISIS or Al Qaeda have twisted the words of the Quran and stripped the rights of women down to the bare minimum. In the 5 years that Taliban controlled Afghanistan, they put all women over the age of 8 under house arrest, under the pretence of creating a 'secure environment where the chastity and dignity of women may once again be sacrosanct.'<sup>2</sup> Women in areas controlled by these terrorists could not work, go to school, or even journey out into

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<sup>1</sup> <http://theconversation.com/explainer-what-islam-actually-says-about-domestic-violence-77245>

<sup>2</sup> [Nancy Hatch Dupree](#). 'Afghan Women under the Taliban' in William Maley (2001) [ISBN 0-7864-1090-6](#). Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban. London: Hurst and Company, [ISBN 0-8147-5586-0](#) pp145-166

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the street without a male relative by her side.<sup>3</sup> Failure to comply resulted in harsh punishments, ranging from genital mutilation to public execution.

What the Taliban did not realize was that by not allowing their women to work and go to school, they had crippled their own education system, healthcare, economy, and country. Most of the nation's teachers had been women, so the sudden lack of teachers led to sudden shutdowns of schools all over the nation. A small proportion of women were allowed to continue in the medical field, as the Taliban insisted on women seeing only female doctors. However, due to the lack of support and female physicians as a whole, it was difficult for a woman to get medical help, leading to a sharp incline in the number of female deaths.<sup>4</sup> The economy stagnated as the UN and US placed heavy sanctions on the country, and therefore everybody suffered, not just the women.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst the original text of the Quran had not been so extreme, misunderstandings and the lack of education caused the Taliban and other terrorist groups to twist the words of the Quran,<sup>6</sup> prompting the deterioration of women's rights and status within Afghanistan and other Islamic nations. Nowadays, although the Taliban no longer controls the country, women in Afghanistan still do not hold the same rights as the men, and probably will not do so in the foreseeable future.<sup>7</sup>

### **Buddhism**

On the other hand, the prominent religion of Buddhism has often been seen to promote gender equality. It was one of the earliest religions to do so, placing no restrictions on educational opportunities for women, claiming that women are just as capable of seeing the truth as men can.<sup>8</sup> The Buddha himself taught men to treat

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliban\\_treatment\\_of\\_women](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliban_treatment_of_women)

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s\\_rights\\_in\\_Afghanistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_rights_in_Afghanistan)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.globalpolicy.org/global-taxes/41753-sanctions-against-al-qaeda-and-the-taliban.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thereligionofpeace.com/pages/quran/women-worth-less.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/turkish-prime-minister-erdogan-targets-women-s-rights-a-839568.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/position.htm>

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women as their equal. Whilst he acknowledged their biological differences, he still insisted on the important role women played in society and in the family.<sup>9</sup>

After the Buddha's death, however, things started to change. Different schools of thought often had different views on the rights of women. One example of which is the Theravada Vinaya, which states that a woman must be reborn as a man before she can be enlightened<sup>10</sup>. It also states that "a being is born as a woman because of bad karma or lack of sufficient good merit"<sup>11</sup>, which teaches believers that it is the woman's fault for being born a woman. Buddhism in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and many other countries currently follow the Theravada Vinaya, and as a result, the progressive views on women have been lost.

The Thai government still does not allow women to become monks, meaning that most have to travel to other countries (such as Sri Lanka) to be ordained.<sup>12</sup> Other than that, Thailand is a patriarchal society, with men dominating most aspects of the economy and political climate, whilst women stay at home to look after the family.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, however, Thailand has become home to one of the largest sex trades in Asia. An estimated 1% of the female population is expected to have worked as a prostitute during their lifetime, and it is not uncommon for a woman or child to enter the sex trade at a young age.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, in August of 2014, AIDS had become the biggest cause of death in Thailand, overtaking stroke, cancer and heart disease.<sup>15</sup> More than 450,000 people currently live with the disease, and over 16,000 have died of it in 2016.<sup>16</sup> Most

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.buddhistvihara.com/newsletters/2003-winter/status\\_of\\_women.htm](http://www.buddhistvihara.com/newsletters/2003-winter/status_of_women.htm)

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vinaya#Theravada>

<sup>11</sup> Encyclopedia of Sexuality: Thailand (Muang Thai) by Kittiwut Jod Taywaditep, M.D., M.A., Eli Coleman, Ph.D. and Pacharin Dumronggittigule, M.Sc., late 1990s;

<sup>12</sup> [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/pg7j5g/the-buddha-said-all-were-equal-thailands-female-monks-fight-for-recognition](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/pg7j5g/the-buddha-said-all-were-equal-thailands-female-monks-fight-for-recognition)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wikigender.org/wiki/women-in-politics-in-thailand/>

<sup>14</sup> [http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Thailand/sub5\\_8c/entry-3223.html](http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Thailand/sub5_8c/entry-3223.html)

<sup>15</sup> <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-1071954>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/asia-pacific/thailand>

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alarmingly, many of these sex workers are girls, no older than the age of 12, exposing the future generation of Thailand to psychological and physical abuse.

Because both girls and boys are taught at a young age that it is the woman's fault for being born a woman, this situation will not get any better unless this mindset of the society is changed. Although the Thai government has made great improvements by providing education and job opportunities for women, because the demand for sex workers has not decreased, neither will the supply.

### **Christianity**

As the largest religion in the world, the status of women in Christianity has long been a controversial topic. Within the New Testament, Apostle Paul had said: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (NIV, Galatians 3:28) This provided women with an opportunity to stand alongside their male counterparts, to be equal under the eyes of God, which was something that had not existed in the Roman society then.<sup>17</sup>

However, some have interpreted the Bible in other ways, seeing that women were only 'helpers' to men<sup>18</sup>, and therefore inferior. Others quote Colossians 3:18, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord."

Jesus himself, however, has always treated women respectfully, allowing them to listen to teachings and hold respectable positions in churches.<sup>19</sup> Some of his closest companions had also been women, and when teaching his disciples how to treat people, he had not made any distinctions between genders.

As time passed by, however, societies gradually drifted from this ideal and eventually became what we now know as the common gender roles of the 19th Century.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq\\_womensrights.htm](http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq_womensrights.htm)

<sup>18</sup> <http://biblehub.com/genesis/2-18.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <https://blog.heartsupport.com/lets-stop-pretending-christianity-is-actually-relevant-okay-ade4c00dabcc>

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Women were supposed to take care of the family and the domestic duties, whilst the men went to work. The suffragette movement of the UK in the early 20th century had seen the church as a symbol of oppression. In that era, women were barred from the ministry and still expected to obey their husbands, as stated in their marriage vows. This led to anger and dissent amongst the women, leading to the violent protests that are symbolic of the suffragette movement.

This shows that although all three religions do respect women to some extent, the lack of education and the misinformed beliefs about a woman's role in society still distorts the original views of the religion. People often use religion as their excuse to justify their sexist behaviour, and gradually, that has just been accepted as part of the religion itself.

### **Solutions**

The first solution to this problem is to have the UN establish a set of regulations that will order most, if not all member states, to pursue gender equality in both the workplace and at home, regardless of religion and geographical region. However, this would breach every country's sovereignty and would take away the right of a country to make its own decisions. This method would also likely lead to backlash from citizens of those countries, who may see this solution as a threat to their current livelihood. This will not provide long-term change, as it does address the root problem of people's perception of women.

The second method would be to provide methods of contraception to women in affected nations, which gives the woman more autonomy over her own body and allows her to make decisions for herself. The biological consequences of sex are unfair to women, as they are the one carrying the baby, whereas men get away with it relatively scotch free. By introducing methods of contraception, women are no longer bound to their duty of child-bearing, and can focus on her career. This has been proven to work in places such as Kenya, where women who do use

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contraceptives are often better educated, and working in a well-paying job.<sup>20</sup>

However, solely providing contraceptives will not work, as many women in rural areas still do not see the importance of it. Whilst they may have the tools to alleviate their problems, if they do not understand the importance of gender equality, they will not take the necessary steps to achieve it.

The third method is to provide both men and women education on the importance of gender equality in society, as well as to give women more opportunities for education. This is the best way to solve the issue, as it tackles the problem at its root core. By changing people's view of women, we can gradually remove the misconceptions and false beliefs about a woman's role in society, whilst retaining some cultural heritage. Providing women with more education also opens them up to more opportunities. One example of this is Education for All Morocco (EFA), which is a free boarding school for girls living in the rural mountains of Morocco. In a Muslim country where 83% of women are illiterate, the EFA has now sent up to 50 girls up to university.<sup>21</sup> Every additional year in primary school could potentially raise a girl's future wages by 10% - 20% and also gives them more job opportunities, allowing them to marry and have children of their own volition. <sup>22</sup>This case study proves that women are still capable of receiving the same opportunities to education, despite of their beliefs and religion.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the status of women throughout the years has largely been based on religious and cultural beliefs, impacting billions of people everywhere in the world. I am no exception. As a Christian myself, I was taught that God is good and that he loves everybody equally. However, I can see that although the original intentions of Christianity had been love and salvation, many have deviated from the original intentions of Jesus.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8059449>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.efamorocco.org/about-us/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures>



As Hong Kong is a mass melting pot of different cultures, this issue is particularly important, to me and to the citizens of Hong Kong. The positive and negative influences of religion and belief have left its mark on the status of women in this city, as many women are still not given the status and respect they deserve. Studies show that the pay gap between the genders has widened in the last decade, with women earning 22% less than their male peers. Additionally, the length of the maternity leave still remains one of the shortest in the world at 10 weeks -- something that has not changed in the past 22 years.<sup>23</sup> Whilst Hong Kong has seen its fair share of groundbreaking women, many aspects of their rights still remain to be unchanged from the older religious views that years of colonialism and war have left behind.

Researching this issue has led me to realize that whilst the church, sangha, or imam are not entirely faultless, the biggest issue at large is the people's perception of women. People over the ages have twisted the words of religion to suit their own ideals, and whilst some of their beliefs do take root in religion, most of it is based upon the social, economical and cultural influences of the day and age.

There is no easy way to solve this, as it is not easy to change the beliefs or perception of women that has lasted for centuries, but it is something that has to change in order for society to advance. If all women are offered more opportunities to education, this can be the first step towards achieving gender equality, eventually empowering the future generation of women.

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<http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/2135943/gender-equality-hong-kong-metoo-milestones-and-why-theres-still-long-way>

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