



# Sacred Texts And Gender Roles: Exploring Women's Rights And Duties In Islam And Christianity

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## Abstract

This paper provides a comparative analysis of women's rights and duties as delineated in the sacred texts of Islam (the Qur'an and Sunnah) and Christianity (the Bible). Utilizing a scriptural-textual method supported by academic literature, it juxtaposes the tenets of both faiths across spiritual, economic, and socio-legal domains. The analysis finds that Islam established a comprehensive and historically progressive framework of rights for women in its 7th-century context, founded on an unambiguous doctrine of spiritual equality. This contrasts with the more ambiguous theological paradigms in Christian scripture, which contain tensions between egalitarian principles and patriarchal injunctions. The paper concludes that many contemporary challenges to women's rights stem from patriarchal cultural interpretations rather than the core texts, positioning an authentic reading of Islamic scripture as a source of liberation and justice for women.

Keywords: Women's Rights, Islam, Christianity, Patriarchy

## Introduction

This comparative analysis examines the rights and duties of women as defined in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. A meticulous examination of the Qur'an, Hadith, and the Bible, supported by academic scholarship, reveals that Islam, through the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), established a comprehensive and legally codified framework of rights for women that was revolutionary for its 7th-century context.<sup>1</sup> This framework stands in notable contrast to the more ambiguous and often contradictory paradigms for women found within Christian scripture. This report explores the critical distinction between divine scripture and the cultural-patriarchal interpretations that have historically impacted the lived realities of women in both traditions.<sup>2</sup>

## Theological and Historical Background

### Theological Foundations in Scripture

A faith's creation narrative is a foundational precedent that shapes the legal and moral lives of its adherents. Islam presents a clear doctrine of spiritual equality, whereas Christian scriptures contain divergent narratives that have been used to justify both egalitarianism and patriarchal subordination.

In Islam, the premise of absolute spiritual equality is the bedrock of women's rights. The Qur'an states that all

humanity originates from a "single soul (*nafswāhida*)" (Qur'an 4:1), establishing that men and women share the same essential human nature.<sup>4</sup> This principle extends to shared responsibility, as the Qur'anic account of the transgression in Eden presents a shared mistake, with both Adam and Eve being tempted and forgiven together.<sup>5</sup> This narrative purges the female of specific blame for humanity's "fall," a concept used in other traditions to justify female subjugation.<sup>6</sup> The Qur'an then provides explicit guarantees of equal spiritual accountability and reward, stating that piety and deeds, not gender, are the basis for divine reward (Qur'an 33:35).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Christian scriptures present a more complex picture. The Book of Genesis contains two creation stories: one suggesting equality (Genesis 1:27) and a second, more historically influential account where Eve is created *from* and *for* Adam (Genesis 2:18-22).<sup>9</sup> This hierarchy is intensified in the narrative of the Fall, where Eve is tempted first and her punishment is to be ruled by her husband (Genesis 3:16).<sup>9</sup> The New Testament epistles, particularly those of St. Paul, draw on these narratives to justify social and religious hierarchy, explicitly linking the subordination of women to the order of creation and the events of the Fall (1 Timothy 2:11-14).<sup>10</sup> This scriptural duality has created a state of perpetual tension within Christian thought on women's status.<sup>9</sup>

### The Socio-Historical Context of Revelation

The rights instituted by Islam in 7th-century Arabia represented a radical paradigm shift. In the pre-Islamic era, or *Jāhiliyyah*, women were largely considered property, denied inheritance, and had no independent legal personhood, with female infanticide being a widespread practice.<sup>13</sup> The advent of Islam, through the revelations to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), acted as a direct catalyst for reform. The Qur'an categorically banned female infanticide (Qur'an 81:8-9) and established the full legal personhood of women, granting them rights to own property, inherit, and consent to marriage—rights not secured by women in the West for centuries.<sup>2</sup> The Prophet's (S.A.W) personal example of compassion and respect for his wives and daughters was crucial in translating these divine laws into lived reality.<sup>4</sup> While Jesus's interactions with women were also counter-cultural and egalitarian, they remained as moral teachings rather than translating into a new, codified legal system for his followers, who continued to live under patriarchal Jewish and Roman laws.<sup>10</sup>

### Comparative Thematic Analysis

#### Economic Rights: Property, Inheritance, and Financial Autonomy

Islam established a revolutionary system of economic rights for women. The Qur'an grants women the right to earn and have full ownership over their property, which is not transferred to her husband upon marriage (Qur'an 4:32).<sup>3</sup> Islam was also the first major world religion to institutionalize women's right to inheritance through direct scriptural mandate, specifying fixed shares for female relatives.<sup>8</sup> While a daughter's share is typically half that of a son's, this is balanced by the man's legal obligation to financially maintain the entire family, whereas a woman's wealth is her own.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the New Testament is largely silent on women's economic rights. Early Christians adopted prevailing secular laws, which led to the development in Christian Europe of doctrines like coverture, where a woman's economic identity was completely subsumed by her husband's until the late 19th century.<sup>16</sup>

#### Marital Rights, Family Life, and Divorce

Islam treats marriage as a sacred legal contract (*'aqd*) that requires the woman's free and explicit consent to be valid.<sup>2</sup> The Prophet (S.A.W) himself annulled forced marriages.<sup>20</sup> Crucially, Islam provides clear mechanisms for the dissolution of a harmful marriage. A woman has the right to initiate a no-fault divorce (

*khul'*) by returning her dowry, or to seek a judicial annulment (*fasakh*) on grounds such as abuse or neglect.<sup>21</sup> Christianity, however, traditionally views marriage as an indissoluble sacrament. The New Testament contains explicit injunctions for wifely submission (Ephesians 5:22-24) and a near-absolute prohibition on divorce, which Jesus equated with adultery (Mark 10:11-12).<sup>10</sup> This combination historically left women with little sanctioned escape from an abusive or unhappy marriage.

## The Pursuit of Knowledge and Public Participation

Islam makes the pursuit of knowledge a religious obligation for every Muslim, male and female.<sup>2</sup> This mandate was a lived reality from the earliest days of Islam, with the Prophet's (S.A.W) wife, 'A'ishah, becoming one of the most important scholars in Islamic history, consulted by prominent male companions on complex legal matters.<sup>21</sup> This fostered a long tradition of female scholarship. In Christianity, the inclusive actions of Jesus, who taught women directly (Luke 10:38-42), are contrasted by explicit restrictions in the Pauline epistles.<sup>10</sup> The command for a woman to be silent in church and not hold authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:11-12) has been used for millennia to bar women from the highest leadership roles in most major Christian denominations.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while Islam linked knowledge to authority for women, Christianity historically decoupled female learning from female authority.

## Discussion

The lived realities of women in Muslim and Christian societies have often diverged from scriptural ideals, largely due to patriarchal cultural practices being conflated with religious doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Harmful practices like forced marriages or "honor" killings have no foundation in the Qur'an or Sunnah, while in Christianity, restrictive Pauline passages were often amplified over the egalitarian actions of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> In response, modern feminist movements have arisen within both faiths. Islamic feminism seeks to achieve gender equality from within an Islamic framework, arguing that the Qur'an's core message is one of radical equality and justice.<sup>29</sup> Christian feminism similarly re-engages with the Bible to challenge patriarchal theology, elevating the teachings of Jesus as the ultimate ethical standard.<sup>12</sup> However, their approaches differ. Islamic feminism can be framed as a project of

*restoration*—reclaiming the clear, codified rights explicitly granted in the Qur'an and Sunnah.<sup>2</sup> Christian feminism must often engage in a more radical

*reformation*, directly contending with restrictive canonical texts by arguing they are culturally bound and not reflective of God's ultimate will.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) established a comprehensive and historically revolutionary framework that affirmed women's spiritual equality and translated it into tangible social, economic, and legal rights. This Islamic framework, built on an unambiguous theological foundation, was unparalleled in its 7th-century context. In contrast, the Christian Bible presents a paradoxical picture, with the egalitarian example of Jesus in tension with patriarchal injunctions in the Pauline epistles. This scriptural ambiguity left women's status to be determined by prevailing cultural norms, which were overwhelmingly patriarchal.

The Islamic framework granted women rights to property, inheritance, marital consent, and divorce that were largely non-existent in other societies for centuries. The Christian framework's silence on many of these legal matters, combined with its stringent prohibition on divorce, left women legally vulnerable. Many of the challenges faced by women in both communities today are the result of patriarchal interpretations that have obscured the original spirit of the sacred texts. For Muslim women, a return to these authentic scriptural foundations is a project of restoration, positioning Islam not as a source of oppression, but as a powerful source of liberation and justice.

The following table provides a summary of the key comparative findings of this report:



Domain of Right/Duty	Islamic Framework (Based on Qur'an and Sunnah)	Christian Framework (Based on the Bible)
<b>Spiritual Status &amp; Creation</b>	Created from a "single soul" ( <i>nafswāhida</i> ); equal spiritual worth and accountability explicitly stated (Qur'an 33:35). Shared blame for the first sin. <sup>4</sup>	Dual creation narratives (one equal, one hierarchical). Eve is blamed for the Fall, leading to a "curse" of male rule (Genesis 3:16). Spiritual equality in Christ (Gal. 3:28) exists in tension with this. <sup>9</sup>
<b>Economic Rights (Property)</b>	Explicit right to earn, own, and manage property independently (Qur'an 4:32). Property is not transferred to husband upon marriage. <sup>3</sup>	No explicit legal framework. Women are seen as patrons owning property, but no scriptural guarantee. Historically led to coverture in Christian nations. <sup>16</sup>
<b>Economic Rights (Inheritance)</b>	Guaranteed, fixed shares of inheritance for female relatives (daughter, wife, mother, sister) as a legal right (Qur'an 4:7, 4:11-12). <sup>14</sup>	No right to inherit if male heirs exist (Numbers 27). A dowry was provided in lieu of a share. New Testament is silent on material inheritance laws. <sup>34</sup>
<b>Marital Rights (Consent)</b>	Marriage is a legal contract requiring the woman's explicit consent. Forced marriages are invalid. <sup>2</sup>	No explicit requirement of female consent for marriage in the text. Marriage is a sacrament, not primarily a contract. <sup>23</sup>
<b>Marital Rights (Spousal Role)</b>	Mutual rights and duties. Husband is the financial provider. Spouses are "garments" for each other. Kindness is emphasized. <sup>2</sup>	Wives are explicitly told to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22). Mutual love is also commanded, but a clear hierarchy is established. <sup>10</sup>
<b>Right to Divorce</b>	Permitted. Women can initiate divorce through <i>khul'</i> or judicial annulment ( <i>fasakh</i> ). Clear regulations for post-divorce support. <sup>21</sup>	Strongly prohibited and equated with adultery (Mark 10, Luke 16). A separated woman must remain unmarried or reconcile. <sup>23</sup>
<b>Right to Education</b>	A religious obligation for all Muslims, male and female. Strong historical precedent of female scholars ( <i>ālimāt</i> ). <sup>2</sup>	Jesus taught women, but there is no mandate for their formal education. Pauline texts restrict their public teaching roles. <sup>10</sup>
<b>Right to Public</b>	Historical precedent for women in public roles (e.g.,	Historical precedent for female prophets and leaders

<b>Office/Leadership</b>	market inspector). Political allegiance ( <i>Bay'ah</i> ) was taken from women. Debate exists based on Hadith interpretation. <sup>2</sup>	(Deborah), but explicit prohibition on women holding authority over men in the church (1 Timothy 2:12). <sup>10</sup>
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