

## Practice of Sikhi and gender equality: a comparative study

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### ABSTRACT

Guru Nanak Dev Ji advocated equality for women. He raised his voice to get them an equal status with men in the domain of religion and society. The study aims to investigate the relevance of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's teachings about gender equality in contemporary times. The first objective was to compare views on gender equality in Sikh and non-Sikh participants. Another objective was to assess the relationship between practice of Sikhi and gender equality in Sikh participants. Convenience and purposive sampling were used to collect data from a sample of 50 married men of ages 25-40 years residing in Delhi NCR, 25 of which were Sikh and the other half belonging to other religions. Gender Norms Scale was used to record attitudes towards gender equality. Spearman's Rank Order Correlation and t test analysis was used to statistically analyze the data. Findings indicated that practice of Sikhi did not emerge as a significant variable influencing views on gender equality. Further research into other concomitant with larger samples is required.

**Keywords:** *Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Practice of Sikhi, Gender Equality*

Gender roles have been defined and crystalized since the conception of hunter-gatherer societies. Amongst indigenous people, division of labour was such that men did the hunting by virtue of their physical strength and mastery over manoeuvring weapons; whereas, women did better as gatherers given their superior manual dexterity and visual perception. This system worked as it was adaptive and necessary for survival.<sup>3</sup> A traditional gender ideology maintains that men's sphere is work and women's sphere is the home. The implicit assumption is that men have greater power than women. Variations of such antiquated gender roles are still present and pulling the strings of society's functioning, which further manifest as gender inequality and discrimination, gender stereotypes sexism, gender-related violence, unequal pay and so forth.

Gender inequality can be conceptualized as an ordinal hierarchy between men and women in material sources, power and status. Traditional sexism reflects an open disregard for the value of women and holds the belief that women are less competent than men. Modern sexism, by contrast, denies any existing discrimination toward women, a malevolence to

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<sup>3</sup> Nigel Barber, "Gender Equality Baffles Evolutionary Psychologists," *Psychology Today* (Sussex Publishers, September 5, 2016), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-beast/201609/gender-equality-baffles-evolutionary-psychologists>

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women's demands, and resents any preferential treatment for women. Hostile sexism involves a negative attitude toward women, particularly those who challenge the traditional female role.<sup>4</sup> Benevolent sexism, reflects positive feelings toward women, including a prosocial orientation toward women (Glick & Fiske, 2001).<sup>5</sup> When it comes to women, things often get lost in a whirlpool of patriarchal archetypes. Only the emotional aptitude of women as being 'nurturing' and 'motherly' is brought into spotlight; pushing other issues like that of equal rights, wage gap and unpaid work in the backdrop. Women's empowerment is a critical aspect of achieving gender equality; a part of which includes improving women's sense of self-worth, her decision-making power, access to resources and opportunities, and restoring a sense of control over her own life inside and outside the home. In this sense, gender inequality is not an isolated concept, it depends not only on the women, but the relationship between men and women in society.

Symbolic interactionist and social learning perspectives on gender socialization provide a loose theoretical framework which relies on the principle that individuals tend to repeat behaviours that elicit rewards and avoid behaviours that lead to punishments. Studies also underscore the way that social structure (sex-segregated sports teams) and culture (sex-segregated clothing, messages in parenting books or teen magazines) shape these processes and communicate cultural information about gender norms. (Messner, 2000; Milkie, 1999).<sup>6,7</sup> According to the Structural perspective, gender inequalities are rooted in women's weaker position in organizational and institutional structures: women are more likely than men to occupy positions with little institutional power and few opportunities for advancement (Epstein, 1988; Kanter, 1977)<sup>8</sup> and when they manage to occupy authority positions, their under-representation and token status create a dynamic that disadvantages them (Kanter, 1977).<sup>9</sup> According to the "Gender Perspective", gender is "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987),<sup>10</sup> an activity that is done to avoid being "judged immoral and incompetent as men and women". It conceptualizes situational factors as the independent variables, and the correspondence between behaviour and gender norms as the dependent variable.

Globally, women have fewer opportunities for economic participation than men, less access to basic and higher education, greater health and safety risks, and less political representation. SGD Gender Index 2019 released by Equal Measures 2030 revealed that nearly 40% of women and girls, or 1.4 billion people, live in countries that are "failing on

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<sup>4</sup>Vicki S. Hegelson, *The Psychology of Gender*, 4th ed. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016))

<sup>5</sup>Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, "An Ambivalent Alliance: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism as Complementary Justifications for Gender Inequality," *The American Psychologist* 56, no. 2 (March 1, 2001): pp. 109-118, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.56.2.109>)

<sup>6</sup>Michael A. Messner, "BARBIE GIRLS VERSUS SEA MONSTERS Children Constructing Gender," *Gender & Society* 14, no. 6 (December 2000): pp. 765 -784, <http://www.michaelmessner.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/barbiegirls.pdf>)

<sup>7</sup>Melissa A. Milkie, "Social Comparisons, Reflected Appraisals, and Mass Media: The Impact of Pervasive Beauty Images on Black and White Girls' Self-Concepts," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (June 1999): p. 190-210, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.2307/2695857>)

<sup>8</sup>Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions: Sex, Gender, and the Social Order* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), ISBN: 9780300046946)

<sup>9</sup>Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1993), ISBN: 0465044522)

<sup>10</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *GENDER & SOCIETY* 1, no. 2 (June 1987): pp. 125-151, <https://doi.org/doi: 10.1177/0891243287001002002>)

## Practice of Sikhi and gender equality: a comparative study

gender equality”. Furthermore, no country was found to be gender equal.<sup>11</sup> Poverty and lack of education drives countless women to work in low paying domestic service, organized prostitution or as migrant laborers. Women are not only getting unequal pay for equal or more work, they are also being offered only low skill jobs for which lower wages are paid.<sup>12</sup> The root cause of gender inequality in Indian society lies in its patriarchy system; which Sylvia Walby, a feminist philosopher, defined as “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.” The system of patriarchy finds its validity and sanction in distorted religious beliefs which view woman as goddesses but fail to recognize her as a human being first.<sup>13</sup> According to UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index, India ranks 127 out of 152 countries. The unpropitious part of gender inequality in India is that the women too, through continued socio-cultural conditioning, have accepted their subordinate position to men. This issue is as much a matter of cultural indoctrination as it is of cultural pressure. For women, the disproportionate pressure to sustain the marriage, manage the household, bear and bring up children alongside careers naturally push them to often compromise with their work life aspirations.

Some religious norms and traditions can contribute to the formation of gender inequalities and to subordinate the role of women in society. In a study examining the influence of religiosity on gender inequality in social, economic and political spheres it was found that states where majority of inhabitants were without religious affiliation, lowest levels of gender inequality was displayed. Christian and Buddhist societies recorded average levels of gender inequality; and highest levels of gender inequality was observed in states with majority of inhabitants adhering to Islam and Hinduism (Klingorová, Kamila & Havlíček, Tomáš, 2015).<sup>14</sup> A study conducted by Stephanie Seguino (2011) indicated that religiosity is strongly correlated with gender inequitable attitudes across countries. Additionally, no single religion stood out as more gender inequitable than others. According to her, the impact of religiosity is likely transmitted via “stealth” effects on everyday behaviour in economic transactions in labour markets, household resource allocation, and government spending.<sup>15</sup>

Sikhism, the fifth largest religion worldwide, has its own way of life that has been laid out by Gurus in a simple, precise and practical manner. In alignment with the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, a Sikh should lead a disciplined life engaged in Naam Simran – meditation on God’s name, Kirat Karni which guides Sikhs to live honourable and honest lives, and Vand Chakna – to share and eat together with the community which reiterates the most important teaching of Guru Ji that all humans are equal. Bani are sacred teachings given by the Divine to the Sikh masters. Recitation of Bani is a key aspect of the Sikh code. The Sikh identity is symbolized by the five K’s – Kara, Kesh, Kirpan, Kacheras, Kanga; which maintain the high moral character of Sikhs.

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<sup>11</sup> “SDG GENDER INDEX”, Equal Measures 2030, (2019), <https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/products/sdg-gender-index/>

<sup>12</sup> “Gender Discrimination & Social Norms in India.” Poverty, Resource Equality & Social Policies (blog), February 23, 2015, <https://poresp.wordpress.com/2015/02/23/gender-discrimination-social-norms-in-india/>

<sup>13</sup> Abhishek Singh, “Gender Inequality in India.” IndiaCelebrating.com, accessed September 2019, <https://www.indiacelebrating.com/social-issues/gender-inequality-in-india/>

<sup>14</sup> Kamila Klingorová and Tomáš Havlíček, “Religion and Gender Inequality: The Status of Women in the Societies of World Religions,” *Moravian Geographical Reports* 2 (June 30, 2015), <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1515/mgr-2015-0006>

<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Seguino, “Help or Hindrance? Religion’s Impact on Gender Inequality in Attitudes and Outcomes,” *World Development* 39, no. 8 (January 26, 2011): pp. 1308-1321, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2010.12.004>

## Practice of Sikhi and gender equality: a comparative study

The Gurdwara broadly translates to “The Door to the Guru,” upon entering which, one is in the actual Presence of the living Guru, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib – the embodiment of the Word, the Shabads, the Songs of worship and prayer of the Gurus. In gurdwaras around the world, Seva is pervasive in all activities. The virtue of Seva – the practice of selfless service, has been embraced at the heart of Sikhism as the highest expression of worship.

The position of Indian women through the ages has been for the most part, one of honourable subordination to and protection by men. Guru Nanak Dev Ji actively defended woman against those who insisted on regulating her to an inferior position merely on the basis of her sex. His Bani is full of references to child marriage, parda, and conditions of widows. His path of salvation was open to women the same as men. In Asa di Var, he says:

- It is from woman, the condemned one that we are conceived and it is from her that we are born.
- It is woman who keeps our race going. It is woman who is sought when one loses one's previous wife.
- It is woman with whom we establish our social ties.
- Then why denounce her from whom even kings and great men are born?
- There is none save the true one who is not born of woman.

Mata Sundri Ji, the worthy consort of Guru Gobind Singh – the tenth and last Guru, is the quintessential of the egalitarian teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. She was a distinguished guide of the Sikhs for 40 years after the death of her husband. When the time arose, she did not hesitate and shouldered the leadership of the Khalsa courageously, completed most of the works left unfinished by Guru Gobind Singh and did not waver in the face of misfortunes. Mata Sundri Ji, the serene Mother, was the epitome of truth, selflessness and austerity. The Sikh community still feels the ripples of her brave heart and indelible contributions. It is safe to surmise that Sikh culture encourages women to break the shackles of patriarchy, and rise to the pedestal that has always been robbed from them.<sup>16</sup>

In view of the above discussion, it would be interesting to examine whether men leading the Sikhi way of life have more egalitarian and equitable views towards women. Furthermore, lack of relevant studies as shown by the review of literature indicates that there was a dearth of research on practice of Sikhi in itself, and particularly pertaining to gender equality also.

Hence, the following study was conceptualized according to the objectives below:

1. To study and compare gender equality in Sikh and non-Sikh male participants.
2. To study the relationship between practice of Sikhi and gender equality in Sikh male participants.

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned objectives, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H<sub>01</sub>: There will be a significant difference between Sikh and non-Sikh participants, pertaining to the dimension of Gender Equality.

H<sub>02</sub>: There will be significant difference between Sikh and non-Sikh participants, pertaining to the dimension of Right and Privileges of Men.

H<sub>03</sub>: There will be significant difference between Sikh and non-Sikh participants, pertaining to the dimension of Equity for Girls.

H<sub>04</sub>: There will be a significant relationship between practice of Sikhi and Gender Equality.

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<sup>16</sup> Khalsa, Sukhmandir. “Biography of Mata Sundri (Sundari Kaur), 2nd Wife of Guru Gobind Singh Mother of Sahibzade Ajit Singh.” Learn Religions, December 20, 2017. <https://www.learnreligions.com/mata-sundri-sundari-kaur-2993591>.

## Practice of Sikhi and gender equality: a comparative study

H<sub>05</sub>: There will be a significant relationship between practice of Sikhi and Rights and Privileges of Men.

H<sub>06</sub>: There will be a significant relationship between practice of Sikhi and Equity for Girls.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Participants*

For the purpose of the present study, 50 males between the age range of 25-40 were selected using purposive and convenience sampling; out of which 25 participants were Sikh, while the rest were non-Sikh. The participants selected were married, fluent in English language, and residents of Delhi NCR.

#### *Tools Used*

Gender Norm Attitudes Scale developed by C. Waszak, J.L. Severy, L. Kafafi, and I. Badawi (2000)<sup>17</sup> was selected after going through various relevant measures. It consists of 14 items and 2 subscales namely – ‘Rights and Privileges of Men’ and ‘Equity for Girls’. The estimate of internal consistency (alpha) for the Rights and Privileges of Men was 0.70. Estimate of internal consistency (alpha) for the Equity for Girls subscale was 0.67. Less agreement with men having more rights and privileges than women reflects a more egalitarian perspective. In the Rights and Privileges of Men subscale, the response category of Disagree was more egalitarian and was awarded a score of 2 whereas, a response of ‘Agree’ represented a traditional response and so, was awarded a score of 1. Reverse scoring was used for the Equity for Girls subscale. Higher scores on both of the subscales indicated more egalitarian beliefs. To measure the practice of Sikhi three questions inquired regarding the number of times the participant visited the Gurudwara Sahib and/or indulged in Path and Seva, in a week. They were scored in terms of frequency. They were ranked in terms of highest to lowest for the purpose of Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation.

#### *Design*

A cross-sectional study was conducted to fulfil the research objectives.

#### *Procedure*

The study began with seeking consent from all the participants in accordance with APA ethical guidelines. The questionnaire was administered through online google forms. Scoring was done as per the scoring procedure. For the purpose of measuring practice of Sikhi, an additional questionnaire was formed, containing 3 questions each recording the frequency of the number of times a participant visited the Gurudwara Sahib, or indulged in path in a week. Raw scores were analysed using mean, standard deviation, t-test and Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation. IBM SPSS Version 23 was used for the same.

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<sup>17</sup> Cynthia Waszak et al., “Fertility Behavior and Psychological Stress: The Mediating Influence of Gender Norm Beliefs Among Egyptian Women,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (September 2001): pp. 197-208, <https://doi.org/doi: 10.1111/1471-6402.00021>

**RESULTS****Table 1** Difference between Sikh (n=25) and non-Sikh (n=25) participants pertaining to gender equality

	Religion	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender Norms	Sikh	25.92	1.681	-1.219	.229
	Non-Sikh	25.32	1.796		
Rights and privileges of men	Sikh	19.00	1.555	-1.202	.235
	Non-Sikh	18.44	1.734		
Equity for girls	Sikh	6.92	.862	-.147	.884
	Non-Sikh	6.88	1.054		

**Table 2** Rank Order Correlation of Practice of Sikhi with Gender Equality

Spearman's Rank Correlation	Gender Norms	Rights & Privileges of Men	Equity for Girls
Rank of Practice of Sikhi	-.064	.082	-.233

\*Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 shows the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation values for practice of Sikhi in relation to gender equality in terms of Gender Norms, Rights and Privileges for Men and Equity for Girls, keeping in mind .05 and .01 level of significance.

Table 2 shows the mean difference and standard deviation between Sikh and non-Sikhs pertaining to Gender Norms, Rights and Privileges of Men and Equity for Girls which further represents gender equality. Furthermore, it shows the t-value which assesses the significance of difference between the means for the relevant variables.

**DISCUSSION**

The present study was conceptualised to assess the significance of difference between Sikh and non-Sikh participants on gender equality based on 3 domains, namely – Gender Norms, Rights and Privileges of Men, and Equity for Girls. The first hypothesis stated that there will be a significant difference between Sikh and non-Sikh participants, pertaining to the dimension of Gender Norms but, the obtained value of t was -1.219 at a level of significance of .229 indicates that the difference was not significant. Hence, the null hypothesis was retained. However, the mean score of Sikh participants was more than that of non-Sikh participants. Furthermore, it was observed that the mean scores of both the groups were closer to the highest possible score, indicating that both groups held egalitarian gender beliefs. The second hypothesis stated that there will be significant difference between Sikh and non-Sikh participants, pertaining to the dimension of Right and Privileges of Men but, the obtained value of t was -1.202 at a level of significance of .235 indicating that the difference was not significant. Thus, the null hypothesis was retained. However, the mean score of Sikh participants was more than that of non-Sikh participants. Moreover, it was observed that the mean scores of both the groups were closer to the highest possible score, indicating that both groups were against skewed rights and privileges of men. The third hypothesis states that there will be significant difference between Sikh and non-Sikh participants, pertaining to the dimension of Equity for Girls but, the obtained value of t was -.147 at a level of significance of .884 indicating that the difference was not significant. Hence, the null hypothesis was accepted. However, the mean score of Sikh participants was

## Practice of Sikhi and gender equality: a comparative study

more than that of non-Sikh participants. Moreover, it was observed that the mean scores of both the groups were closer to the highest possible score, indicating that both groups were in support of equity for girls.

Such results may be explained by the sample characteristics; all participants were urban, educated and in the younger age group, hence they may be more inclined towards holding egalitarian gender beliefs. Another factor influencing such results could be the operation of social desirability bias, as well as the researcher being a female. There is also a possibility that non-Sikh participants may have been influenced by media and social movements like the ‘#MeToo Movement.’

Another objective of the study was to investigate the relationship between practice of Sikhi and views on gender equality. There was no significant correlation between practice of Sikhi and Gender Norms, Rights and Privileges of Men and Equity for Girls respectively. The correlational values were  $-.064$ ,  $.082$  and  $-.233$  at 0.05 significance level, respectively. Hence, all the three ( $H_{04}$ ,  $H_{05}$ ,  $H_{06}$ ) null hypotheses were retained.

One reason for the correlational results could be that practice of Sikhi was simply measured in terms of number of times a participant visited the Gurudwara, and/or indulged in Path and Seva. Social desirability bias may have also crept in. We may also state that following the religious rituals faithfully may not directly impact views on gender equality. It is also possible that participants who don't rigorously practice Sikhi, could be influenced more by social media, current trends and movements in favour of gender equality, instead of religious teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

## CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the findings of the above study, we can conclude that males in 25-40 years age range held egalitarian views, which was a positive and a gratifying finding. However, practice of Sikhi did not emerge as a significant variable influencing views on gender equality.

### *Limitations*

This research is subject to several limitations. The first concerns a correlational methodology, due to which a causal relationship cannot be inferred from the results. Convenience and purposive sampling were used. Data was collected from a sample of 50 young adults of age 25-40 years old residing in urban areas of Delhi NCR, restricting the generalizability of the research to a broader population. The questionnaire was administered in English through the platform of Google Forms, hence, responses of people not fluent in English, or lacking the technological resources to fill the form, were not recorded. The responses were restricted to a strict ‘Agree’ and ‘Disagree’ category, leaving little room for flexibility of answers. Additionally, social desirability bias may have crept in. The research did not take into account, sociocultural influences and learning, and focused completely on the relationship between religion and views on gender equality.

### *Future Implications*

A worthwhile research to undertake is to study the causal relationship between religion and views on gender equality through regression analysis. Further researches could also include the views of older, rural and uneducated population, to gain insight into the workings of the same. Studying the relationship of different religions with gender equality while simultaneously taking into account other sociocultural factors, is a valuable research avenue

to explore. A larger sample branching out to different cities, or even countries, would be better generalizable. Lastly, in the future, a more detailed questionnaire could be used to gain deeper understanding of the same.

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## Practice of Sikhi and gender equality: a comparative study

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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