

Socio-Religious Activism of Women in Christian Missionaries and Islamic Movements

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Abstract:

The rising tide of educating and empowering women has considerably influenced the lives of women in every walk of life throughout the world in the present 21st century. The part of religious activism in people's lives has also ignited in terms of including more and more women into the religious realms and missions owing to the general awareness and the progress followed by the revolutions occurred worldwide in the past two centuries.

Regarding women's ordinance in churches, the women were given rapid responses and those who approved this, used faith claims and Biblical examples to bring out God's approval for it. Then the time had experienced the traditional view as well as the egalitarian view of the status and roles of women in Christian missionaries. This new phenomenon is still being fiercely debated. The Islamic movements were also seen following the footsteps of the Christian missionaries in providing the space for women to live and voluntarily play the role of *Daiyas* (missionaries). Though for many reasons, Islamist women have often been less visible and less spoken compare to their male counterparts, however, one cannot deny their active participation in the Islamic movements. The pragmatism of women in these Islamic movements is what helped them overcome the boundaries of society. Hence, allowed them to continue to play a significant role in these movements not only in the social aspect but in the religious spheres as well.

This paper aims to study the unconventional similarities and differences between the status, role and activism of women in Christian missionaries and in Islamic movements and the importance of that as well as the contributions of both counterparts of different religious affiliations in the path of God. Since, this comparison is unstudied and unique hence, this study may be a valuable contribution in the field of interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: Christian missionaries, Islamic movements, Female missionaries, Islamist women, Interfaith dialogue etc.

Introduction:

Religion had been at the centre point of people's lives throughout the ages and religious preaching through various forms had been a continuous practice which can be said in other words that it is as old as the religion itself. Both the Semitic religions Christianity as well as Islam have strictly adhered to preaching and mass conversions which undoubtedly given rise to the religions at their times. What is essential to note is that the propagating and preaching of the religious teachings were done by both men and women followers alike in the earliest accounts of both the religions. Women played critical role in the rise of Christianity (Stark, 1995) as well as Islam and this was all along possible because the early church was

focused and inclusive of women in the missionary roles as was the early mosque revolutionary in upgrading and elevating women's status amidst the pagan patriarchal society.

The role of women in Christian missionaries ranged from playing supportive roles as wives and daughters to serving as colleagues, co-workers and ministers in the missionary service to the world. But in reality, many of these functions are not new at all as the attention paid today towards the female forces is mainly because of the growing recognition of the abilities and capabilities of women who can serve in multiple folds including the domains of religion. This debate is connected with the growing tide of feminism in empowering women through education at the turn of the modern times. In the discourse of empowerment, education is defined as a course of action which does not only carry the sense of the joy of learning and reading but it also has instrumental, social and progressive roles in developing any society or nation and is regarded as the most important tool for both men and women to play an active role in social development including economics, politics, religion and society. On the other hand, 'empowerment' is defined as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is not a unitary concept but a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, to use in their own lives, their communities, and their society, by acting on issues that they define as important" (Page and Czuba, 1999). Hence, in the entire exercise of empowerment of women, education remains vital in every part of the world.

The pressure to improve the status of women and empower them has been built up by longing feminist voices and multiple forces throughout the years. A critical survey of feminist political theory from classical to postmodern schools throws light how these pressures paved the way for several international conventions on women around the globe and in the course of time important bills, rights, goals and laws have been reinforced to progress the development or empowerment process of women. Many theories which emerged in the West during the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries like Liberalism, Nationalism, Marxism, and Feminism are still influential and dominant and bear varieties of definitions and connotations. These theories had undoubtedly affected the status as well as different roles to be played by women in the religious domains as the growing awareness had led to the point of equal inclusion of women in the religious duties proving that from the earliest texts and practices provided by both Christianity as well as Islam.

Islam and Christianity, both the Semitic religions, are proselytizing religions. This created a class of preachers, propagators as well as institutionalization of religion for this purpose. In Christianity, an institutionalized Church emerged with top-down ranking of religious positions responsible for religious propagation. Women were incorporated within these institutions. In early Islamic traditions too, women were actively engaged in preaching, teaching and propagating of Islam. A gradual decline started coming in number of and level of active participation of Muslim women in Islamic preaching. Among many reasons for this decline was the spread of Islam among patriarchal societies of many countries from Africa and Asia.

Regarding women's ordinance in churches, the women were given rapid responses and those who approved this, used faith claims and Biblical examples to bring out God's approval for it. Then the time had experienced the traditional view as well as the egalitarian view of the status and roles of women in Christian missionaries. This new phenomenon is still being fiercely debated. The Islamic movements were also seen following the footsteps of the Christian missionaries in providing the space for women to live and voluntarily play the role of *Daiyas* (missionaries). Though for many reasons, Islamist women have often been less visible and less spoken compare to their male counterparts, however, one cannot deny their

active participation in the Islamic movements. The pragmatism of women in these Islamic movements is what helped them overcome the boundaries of society. Hence, allowed them to continue to play a significant role in these movements not only in the social aspect but in the religious spheres as well.

This paper aims to study the unconventional similarities and differences between the status, role and activism of women in Christian missionaries and in Islamic movements and the importance of that as well as the contributions of both counterparts of different religious affiliations in the path of God. Since, this comparison is unstudied and unique hence, this study may be a valuable contribution in the field of interfaith dialogue.

Role of women in Christian missionaries:

It is widely accepted by scholars and experts that women in Christian missionaries had not received considerable recognition to their important roles leading to the path of God until recent. It appears that the earliest missionaries were wives of the male missionaries who accompanied them wherever they went and supported them in their missions, however, the later women who were ambitious, courageous, well-educated and committed to their work desired for a more active role in the missions and hence founded The Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes in 1800 and since then there is no looking back. Christian missionary women have progressed in fundraisings for the missions' progress, educated themselves and their children as well as appointed and sent the all women missionaries to the far flung areas. The enormous contribution of female missionaries in colonial subjected countries like India throws the light proportionately upon the cause and effect of the role of women Christian missionaries.

By nineteenth century, feminist movements started spreading all of Europe, the Christian missionaries too were influenced and women were being re-incorporated in religious and missionary institutions. As mentioned above, women started mobilizing their own movement and founded the Boston Female Society for missionary purposes in 1800. At the same time, missionaries also were being dispatched with colonial administrations and hence women were being welcomed. Women in Christian missionaries have progressed in fund raising for the missions' progress, education, health and other activities. Women gradually constituted the majority of health care and education services, along with significant numbers in counselling relief work, preaching as well as administrative ministries. Christian women's participation in missionaries gradually developed as strong cultural and administrative tradition with clear demarcations of roles, rights and status of these women. Marriages were discouraged, teaching and medical roles were more open, higher administrative and leadership roles were closed. A combination of patriarchy and modernity was widely accepted as a reality.

At present, the fact that thousands of Christian missionary women have given their lives for the cause of church and in the devoted path of Christ has been acknowledged clearly not only by Church but also in general, however, women are asking to be given appropriate recognition to their work which they have been accomplishing by giving them positions on equal footing with their male counterparts. The wide variety of roles filled by women in mission today reflects the versatility and competency with which they serve and this is the reason why an insufficient recognition may have a negative effect on the status of women in the missionaries as it may lead to the notion that patriarchy and gender biasness are still prevalent in practical terms in the religious missions.

Though considerable progress has been made in recent years in lifting up the limitations which generally hindered the path of the progress of women in the missions but still a few tasks still remain predominantly carried on by only men. One of these limitations can be marked in the leadership domains. However,

women are now able to explore more avenues for their cause and mission and whatever the ongoing barriers are there in their way are more related to the cultural and social factors rather than the traditional male dominance. For instance, in societies where the segregation of men and women is still prevalent, female missionaries are often confined to females only. Limitations such as the above mentioned are not the product of restrictions imposed by a mission agency but by the natural causes. Some of the major roles played by women Christian missionaries include the domains of education, health services, women's work, counselling, relief work, Christian education or preaching as well as administrative ministries.

Christian female missionaries have contributed immeasurably towards the education, training and development of not only Christians but also general masses which have lead mostly in mass conversions. Their particular focus on the upliftment and progress of women had been a pioneering contribution. The health and care services are another area where female Christian missionaries have accomplished results to greater lengths. This had given the recognition to the care and warmth these women provide to the weaker sections of the societies and recreated their image as of the Messiahs of the poorest of the poor. The gender segregated societies where only women can reach the other women or in other words only *Zenans* were allowed in the *Zenankhanas*, these missionary women were the ones who could be regarded as the heroines of the mission's work as their work is indispensable. The female missionary counsellors or relief workers are also the women who have provided proof of their devotion to the mission and cause. A relatively recently explored area of Christian female missionaries has been the domain of administrative positions and ministries where a few women have been serving with great passion and zeal and paving the way for others to follow their pathway.

However, there are also few challenges to female Christian missionaries in playing their important roles. These challenges or problems can be marked in the direct clashes between the sexes predominantly in the top leadership positions where firstly, very few women reach, yet when they reach, they face the problem of being resented by their male counterparts, building tensions and limitations upon the role to be played by a leader be it male or female. At times, women also experience that the ideas they present are being belittled by fellow men partners leading to their low confidence levels in program planning. Another part where women missionaries are seemingly weaker is of finance where scarcely a woman is included in financial decision making process. These challenges can only be addressed by appropriate expertise training and conducive environment at work domain. Owing to the great role played by the women throughout the length and width of the Christian history, the necessary and relevant steps to be taken in further empowering and enhancing the status and role of women have been under process. Due to these positive steps taken by the Church and the leadership, the women today are becoming highly trained and they are expecting the possibility of developing new ideas. They are also committed and articulated in their commitment towards Christ and Christian mission.

Role of women in Islamic Movements:

Before starting this section, let a small incident be narrated which perhaps can be negligible in general terms but very serious in reality. Once a friend told "I really like to follow a religion which can satisfy my thoughts and beliefs in a logical and rational way; I would like to go with Islam but the most depressing thing with it is the suppression of women which stops me to accept this religion". Though this might be a vague thought of that person who might have not gone through the teachings of Islam and might have really not understood the essence of the Islamic teachings regarding women, however on the other hand it raises an alarming question about the status of Muslim women or their roles and the practices of Muslim

Ummah towards women's issues because this view reflects the general understanding of Islamic teachings through Muslim practices which somehow have been almost contrary to the egalitarian and equalitarian concept of Islam in gender issues. Thus it is important to ponder upon the question of Muslim women and deliberate such discussion.

According to the teachings of Islam fundamentally derived from the texts of Quran, women is defined as a prominent entity of human society, neither subjugated nor subordinated as was generally perceived or practised by Muslim *Ummah* at the beginning of Islam. Islam came with fresh and revolutionary ideas at the time of its rise and brought many reforms in gender issues. Islam's egalitarian teachings primarily focused on the equality between men and women as Quran states in *Surah al-Nahl*, Verse 97 (Translation): "*Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith. Verily, to him/ her will We give a new life, a life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.*" (16: 97).

When women were disturbed and confused about their status and rights in Islam, they approached the Prophet and wanted to know their real status vis-a-vis men and then the verse of *Surah al-Ahzaab*, Verse 35 was revealed. The verse is quite important one as regards to women's status which translates as:

"Surely the men who submit and women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the charitable men and the charitable women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their chastity and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah and women who remember - Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and mighty reward." (33: 35).

The question of sexual equality is very important parameter of modernity along with democracy and human rights. Whatever be the status of women in the Quran, status of women in Muslim societies is far from satisfactory. Hence, for a long time in history, Muslim women have been often confused and disheartened for what was granted to them directly by God and what was practised against them in their societies. The unequal balance between both genders as well as the largely practised segregation of both sexes in Muslim communities have impacted in a certain level of unjust environment for Muslim women which had been reflected in almost all domains of life because Muslim societies still maintained reluctance to include women in active religious responsibilities for various reasons like: 1. Islam could not evolve an institutionalized missionary; 2. Preaching remained largely volunteer and individual choice; 3. The spread of Islam in Muslim countries had already reached to optimum level; 4. The "western civilization" emerged as a threat to Islamic vision of family system. But Muslim women continued playing important roles at individual levels and started participating in Islamic activism without assuming definite positions and roles. This was addressed vehemently by Islamist women in recent times with the deliberation of Islamic texts by revisiting, researching and re-describing the entire notion of gender debate within the parameters of Islamic teachings.

Religious preaching through various forms has been a continuous practice since the advent of Islam but Islamic activism in the form of Islamic movements has been the product of recent centuries and this new phenomenon is perceived by different people with different names, various adjectives and distinct phrases like Islamic fundamentalism, radical Islam, Islamism, Islamic movements, Islamic activism or sometimes religious terrorism etc. The remarkable feature of the newly rising forces of Islamism since the end of the nineteenth century is their contribution to socio-political changes in one way or the other in the Islamic countries. Among various ideologies which were popular at one time or another in the Islamic world like

secularism, modernism, reformism, traditionalism or socialism, Islamism has become the most vocal force of contemporary Muslim societies owing to the adherence to the religion Islam. Therefore, (at present) Islamism has become the most popular identification models in the Muslim world.

As Islamic scholars started issuing Fatwas to fight against colonialism, Islamic scholars started accepting innovative ideas in “Islamic Organisation” or “Institutionalisation of Islamic Activism”. Islamic groups modelled after Western political organisations started emerging. Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat Islami al-Hind, Wahhabi Movement, Sannusi Movement and many other movements with different levels of commands and leadership became popular and powerful. However, the inclusion of Muslim women at the initial stages was slow and reluctant. But as of now, the role of Muslim women in the concept of “Islamic Institution” or “Islamic Organisation” has been accepted in more powerful way. The leadership roles for Muslim women are being accepted gradually.

Women are attracted in large numbers towards the Islamic forces of the contemporary Muslim societies, despite the fact that their approach towards women is considered negative by many secularists and feminists, however, they find in these movements a space where they can press to better the status of women within an Islamic framework which is very much close to their own religio-cultural societies. When Muslim women decided not to lag behind, the Islamic movements also responded by paying attention towards the women cadre but in both oppressive and progressive forms. Therefore popular Islamic movements in the Muslim populated countries like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt, PJD (the Party for Justice and Development) in Morocco, NIF (National Islamic Front) in Sudan, IAF (Islamic Action Front) in Jordan, JIH (Jamaat Islami al-Hind) in India etc. paid particular attention towards women in order to answer the global concerns and pressures.

The changing situation of the global scenario in terms of political and economic conditions had led to several social changes which have largely impacted, influenced, shaped and moulded the Islamic movements as well which in return had a great impact on Muslim women. In the Muslim countries where the Islamic movements were in the realms of religio-political activism, they extensively evolved and moderated their ideologies by debating and re-evaluating the *Sharia* principles to accommodate the popular votes of both men and women alike. The rise of women’s activism in Islamic movements has not only strengthened the position of those Islamic movements that have chosen to participate in the legal political processes in their countries but it has also unleashed great debate on the status, role and rights of Muslim women within an Islamic framework. At a time when Muslim women’s position and their status is considered predominantly as subordinate to men, Islamic movements appear as a ray of hope for them from where they can gain their public roles as well as understand their true status in the Islamic framework by reconstructing their view.

Studies show that while Islamic movements embrace women’s participation as an Islamic value, they have generally not been including women in their organizational structure as they do with men because on the one hand they accept the belief in gender equality but on the other they reject the belief in equality in all spheres and advocate for separate spheres. Women’s struggle in the Islamic movements, not only challenge the socially ingrained traditional norms but also opens up the way of *Ijtihad* (research) in understanding the gender roles with pragmatic views in accordance to the egalitarian Islamic teachings.

Conclusion:

It is interesting to compare both missionary and Islamic ideas of women’s participation in religious institutions. While Islam does not have a specific missionary institution, Islamic scholars had to respond

only the questions of patriarchy and Western modernity in order to allow women in Islamic activism. Once Islamic societies found their desired model of “Islamic organisation”, Muslim women found their ways in religious activism. But in case of Christian missionaries, the presence of institutionalized missionary and the continuity of male dominated institutional Church specified and limited their roles. However, despite the fact that women’s presence in the Islamic movements and parties, so far, has not resulted in an influential or vocal role for women in their parties, yet they have to a large extent have overcome the intellectual crisis of “how to include women in public religious activism”. This is both an opportunity as well as a challenge as the number of educated and active Muslim women will increase, the role of Muslim women in Islamic activism and public sphere cannot be denied despite many patriarchal problems. The change in Islamic societies is more of discursive and intellectual transformation while the change in Christian missionaries, it is mostly institutional.

A comparative analysis after studying the similarities and differences between the role and activism of women in Christian missionaries and in Islamic movements, throws light on the fact that though both the orders have been contributing in attaining the path of God according to different religious affiliations but the results of these movements have been different for each group. On one hand, where women in the Christian missionary movements have progressed in multi-dimensional folds and progressed the theoretical understanding of women’s status and role in religious missions as well as increased their practical output by training women in highly sophisticated way in almost all fields of professionalism, on the other hand, the Islamic movements have been in the formative state in uplifting and progressing the status and roles of women, hence, their outcome has not yet produced the same systematic effect in closing the gender gap.

Islamic activism of women, particularly, in the Islamic movements seems to be strange from the perspectives of the thinkers who view suspiciously towards everything attached with Islam and who perceive Islam to be radically oppressive to women, sticking to rigid ideologies which prescribe for them a subordinate role. However, despite the fact that women’s presence in the Islamic movements and parties, so far, has not resulted in an influential or vocal role for women in their parties yet their presence is neither insignificant nor unsuccessful. Women are still serving as early risers as well as role models for other women. Their entry into influential decision making bodies is started providing and will provide a learning opportunity for women as party players and reformers.

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