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GENDER EQUALITY AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: BUILDING INCLUSIVE HUMAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

This study explored the interplay between gender equality and religious diversity, shedding light on the complexities, challenges, and potential solutions in fostering inclusive human relations. Gender equality and religious diversity are critical facets of modern society, influencing social dynamics, cultural norms, and human relations. Across history, societies have grappled with hierarchical structures, biases, and discrimination based on both gender and religious affiliations. While progress has been made in acknowledging and addressing these issues, persistent challenges continue to hinder the realization of a truly inclusive society where individuals can thrive irrespective of their gender identity or religious beliefs. To address gender inequality and foster religious inclusivity, this paper recommends promoting awareness, education, and advocating for policies that safeguard the rights and dignity of individuals, regardless of their gender or religious background. The work concludes that achieving genuine inclusivity involves collective action, where communities, governments, religious institutions, and individuals collaborate to create societies that uphold the principles of equality, respect, and dignity for everyone.

Introduction

Gender equality and religious diversity are critical facets of modern society, influencing social dynamics, cultural norms, and human relations. Across history, societies have grappled with hierarchical structures, biases, and discrimination based on both gender and religious affiliations. The intersectionality of these factors presents challenges in creating inclusive spaces where individuals can thrive irrespective of their gender identity or religious beliefs.

Religious diversity encompasses a spectrum of beliefs, practices, and traditions that enrich the cultural fabric of communities worldwide. However, in some instances, religious differences have led to tensions and conflicts, impeding the advancement of inclusive human relations. **Huntington** argues that the world is divided into different civilizations, each with its own unique values and beliefs, and that these differences are a major source of conflict (**Huntington, 1996**). Similarly, gender equality remains an ongoing struggle, with disparities evident in various fields, including education, employment, and representation in leadership roles.

Understanding the complexity of these issues requires a multidimensional approach that navigates societal norms, historical contexts, and legal frameworks. Addressing gender inequality and fostering religious inclusivity involves promoting awareness, dismantling biases, and advocating for policies that safeguard the rights and dignity of individuals, regardless of their gender or religious background.

Gender equality and religious diversity stand as pillars of human rights and societal progress. While progress has been made in acknowledging and addressing these issues, persistent challenges continue to hinder the realization of a truly inclusive society. This article aims to explore the interplay between gender equality and religious diversity,

shedding light on the complexities, challenges, and potential solutions in fostering inclusive human relations.

Definition of Terms

Gender equality

Gender equality is the state of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for women and men. It is a fundamental human right and a necessary condition for building inclusive human relations. In the concept of gender equality Martha Nussbaum explains that Gender equality means that men and women should have the same opportunities to develop their capabilities and to live their lives in accordance with their own choices. This means that they should be free from gender-based discrimination and violence (Nussbaum, 2000). Generally speaking, gender equality requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. It means that the social roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities of men and women should be based on their choices and preferences, rather than on rigid and predetermined norms. It shows that there should be no limits on what men and women can achieve, based on their gender (Butler, 2004).

In the work of Amartya Sen, gender equality is the state of equal opportunities for people of all genders to participate in all spheres of society. This definition emphasizes the importance of providing equal opportunities for women and men to access education, employment, healthcare, and political participation. Sen argues that gender equality is not just about fairness, but also about the overall well-being of society. He believes that when women have equal opportunities, they are more likely to contribute to economic growth, social development, and peace (Sen 2009).

Religious Diversity

Religious diversity is the presence of more than one religion in a society, often with the implication that these religions are different from the majority religion (Eck, 2001). According to Smart Religious diversity is “the coexistence of different religions within a single society or in the world as a whole”. (Smart, 1996, 12). He argues that religious diversity is a natural consequence of human creativity and the inherent plurality of human experience. Smart defines religious pluralism as the fact that there are many different religions in the world, and that these religions are not all identical in their beliefs, practices, or institutions. He argues that religious pluralism is a natural consequence of human diversity, and that it is something to be celebrated rather than feared. (Smart, 1996). Religious pluralism for Hick, is the recognition that there is more than one way to approach the ultimate reality. He argues that all religions are different expressions of the same fundamental truth, and that we can learn from each other by studying our different religious traditions. (Hick 1985).

Importance of Gender Equality and Religious Diversity in Building Inclusive Human Relations

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a critical element in building inclusive and resilient societies. Gender equality and women empowerment do not mean that men and women become the same; only that access to opportunities and life changes are neither dependent on, nor constrained by, their sex (Johnson 2008). It is essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring the well-being of all people, regardless of their

gender identity. When women and girls have equal opportunities like their men and boys' counterpart, they can contribute their full potential to society's growth. These can be a means of leading to economic growth, and improved health outcomes. Gender equality is a necessary precondition for world peace and security by reducing conflict and promoting tolerance and understanding (Hudson, 1997). When individuals, regardless of their gender, have equal access to education, employment, healthcare, political participation, and other opportunities, it fosters a more just and equitable society.

Gender equality helps to build inclusive human relations in different ways. For instance, it promotes the equal participation of women and men in all aspects of society, including the economically, politically, and culturally and other aspect of life. This ensures that women's voices are heard and that their needs are taken into consideration. Gender equality also helps to challenge and break down gender stereotypes. These stereotypes can lead to discrimination and violence against women and girls. By promoting gender equality, a more just and equitable society can be created for all. Gender equality encourages a culture of mutual respect and understanding between individuals of all genders. When gender stereotypes and biases are challenged, it creates a more open and accepting environment where individuals are valued for their unique talents and contributions, regardless of their gender. Gender equality is essential for creating a more peaceful and just world (Perez, 2019). When individuals feel valued and included, it gives self-worth, reduces conflict and fosters a sense of unity within a community.

Furthermore, gender equality helps to promote education and empowerment for women and girls. This is essential for their economic, social, and political advancement. When women and girls are educated and empowered, they are better able to participate in society and contribute to its development. Gender equality empowers women and girls to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society. By providing access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, women and girls can become active participants in shaping their own lives and the lives of those around them. When women are empowered like men they can unleash their entrepreneurial potential and contribute to economic development. However, women's participation in politics helps advance gender equality and affects both the range of policy issues that get considered and the types of solutions that are proposed.

Gender equality challenges and breaks down harmful gender norms that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women and girls. By promoting positive role models and challenging traditional gender stereotypes, it creates a more equitable and supportive environment for all. In short, gender equality is essential for building inclusive human relations because it promotes the equal participation of women and men in all aspects of society. Gender equality is intrinsically linked to sustainable development and is vital to the realization of human rights for all.

How Gender Inequality and Religious Discrimination Have Created a System of Oppression

Gender inequality and religious discrimination are deeply interwoven, contributing to the establishment and perpetuation of oppressive systems within societies globally. These systems operate on various levels, shaping social norms, institutional structures, and individual experiences, leading to marginalization and subjugation of certain groups. It is important to acknowledge that where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who

are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision making and access to economic and social resources. Therefore, a critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Sometimes, the exclusion of women directly or indirectly from power and decision-making has a profound impact on women's lives. It limits their ability to advocate for their own interests and to shape the laws that govern them. When women are denied access to education and this lack of education can make it difficult for them to find employment and to earn a living wage. It can also make them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse as well as being subjected to violence in the home and in public. This violence can take physical, sexual, and emotional abuse etc. It can have a devastating impact on women's lives, both physically and emotionally.

Violence against women is not a women's issue, it is a human rights issue. It is an issue that affects every single one of us. (Gates, 2017) Religious minorities are often persecuted for their beliefs. This persecution can take many forms, including physical violence, harassment, and exclusion from social, political or economic opportunities. Religious minorities are often forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in other communities.

Gender inequality and religious discrimination often intersect, exacerbating the marginalization experienced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. Women, for instance, frequently face discrimination within some religious institutions, if not all, restricting their access to leadership positions or imposing limitations on their rights based on religious interpretations that propagate patriarchal norms.

Religious Teachings Used to Justify Gender Inequality

Despite the existence of religious teachings that promote gender equality, there are other religious texts and traditions that have been used to justify gender inequality. This is often the result of selective interpretation and misapplication of religious principles, often driven by patriarchal power structures that seek to maintain male dominance. For instance, some interpretations of the Quran's verse on male guardianship (known as Surah An-Nisa, (4:34) have been used to justify the subordination of women in marriage and society. Similarly, some passages in the Bible, such as Paul's instruction to wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22), have been used to argue that women should be subservient to men in all aspects of life. These interpretations have often been used to justify practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and the exclusion of women from leadership roles in religious communities and society at large. In her book, Gervais explores how religious texts have been used to justify the subordination of women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and religious leadership. She also examines how religious teachings have been used to naturalize violence against women, including domestic violence, honor killings, and female genital mutilation (FGM) (Gervais, 2000).

Religious scriptures and teachings can be interpreted in various ways, leading to diverse perspectives on gender roles and equality. While some interpretations support gender equality, others perpetuate gender inequality.

Religious Teachings in Support of Gender Equality

Equality in Creation and Human Dignity: Many religions emphasize the equal creation of all humans and their inherent dignity and worth. This foundational principle challenges

gender-based discrimination and promotes equal rights and opportunities for both men and women. For instance, the Bible, the holy book of Christianity, affirms that God created men and women in his own image and likeness, and that both men and women are equal in God's eyes (Genesis 1:27). Similarly, the Quran, the holy book of Islam, states that men and women are equal before God and that women have the same rights as men (Quran 4:34).

Shared Roles and Responsibilities: Religious teachings often emphasize shared roles and responsibilities between men and women, highlighting their complementary contributions to society and family life. This challenges rigid gender stereotypes and promotes mutual respect and cooperation. Several religious texts recognize and celebrate the leadership and contributions of women throughout history. For example, in the Christian Holy Bible; Deborah, a prophetess and judge, leads the Israelites to victory over the Canaanites. (Judges 4-5:) Ruth, a Moabite woman, demonstrates loyalty and devotion to her mother-in-law, Naomi, and becomes the ancestor of King David. (Ruth 1-4)

The sacred book for Muslims also shows where women are recognized for their contributions like Maryam (Mary), the mother of Jesus, is praised for her devotion to God and her miraculous conception of Isa (Jesus) (Quran 3:42-43). The story of the Queen of Sheba, a wise and powerful ruler, is recounted as an example of a woman's intelligence and leadership (Quran 27:15-19). These examples and many others serve as inspiration and justification for women's participation in all spheres of society, including leadership positions. In addition to these explicit statements of equality, many religious traditions have fostered practices and interpretations that support gender equity. For example, some Islamic scholars argue that the Quran's emphasis on education and knowledge applies equally to both men and women, and that women should have equal opportunities to pursue education and contribute to society (Wadud, 2002). Similarly, some Christian denominations have challenged traditional interpretations of biblical passages that seem to subordinate women, arguing that these interpretations are based on cultural biases rather than the true meaning of the texts (Ruether, 1983).

How Religious Institutions Can Promote Gender Equality.

Religious leaders can reinterpret religious texts to emphasize the equal dignity and worth of men and women, and to encourage women to participate fully in all aspects of society. They can use their platform to speak out against gender-based violence and discrimination, and to advocate for policies that promote women's empowerment.

Religious institutions can provide financial and other support to women's education and leadership programs and can encourage women to pursue careers in religious leadership. It can as well challenge gender stereotypes by promoting positive images of women in religious texts for example, the story of Esther, a Jewish queen in Persia, who saves her people from being exterminated by Haman, the king's advisor. (**Esther 1-10**). and teachings, and by celebrating the accomplishments of women in religious communities. Also, encouraging women's leadership roles within the religious activities, or holding decision-making positions can be of great help.

Many religious institutions collaborate with secular and non-religious organizations that work towards gender equality. This cooperation helps amplify efforts to advance women's rights on a broader societal level.

Challenges to Building Inclusive Human Relations

Cultural norms play a pivotal role in perpetuating challenges related to gender inequality and hinder the establishment of inclusive human relations in societies. These norms include:

Traditional Gender Roles: Cultural norms often dictate specific roles for men and women, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. These roles may limit opportunities for both genders to engage equally in social, economic, and political spheres, impacting inclusive relations. One of Adichie's central arguments is that cultural practices often relegate women to subordinate roles, limiting their access to education, employment, and leadership opportunities. She points to the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes in childhood, where girls are often discouraged from pursuing traditionally male-dominated fields and encouraged to prioritize domestic responsibilities (Adichie, 2014).

Normalization of Gender Discrimination: In some cultures, discrimination against women is normalized or justified through cultural practices or beliefs. This normalization makes it harder to challenge and change societal attitudes that perpetuate inequality. Cultural norms also influence the socialization process, shaping individuals' beliefs and attitudes from a young age. Biases and stereotypes passed down through cultural norms can hinder efforts to promote equality and inclusivity. Gender is a social construct, not a biological imperative. Adichie argues that our understanding of gender is shaped by cultural norms and expectations, rather than by our innate biology. (Adichie, 2014). Addressing these challenges involves challenging and reshaping cultural norms through education, awareness campaigns, advocating for gender equality in cultural practices.

The Role Societal Structures, and Political Systems in Perpetuating Challenges Characterized by Gender Inequality

In societies with gender inequality, building inclusive human relations faces several challenges. Deeply entrenched gender norms and stereotypes perpetuate unequal power dynamics, limiting opportunities for inclusive relationships. Insufficient education and awareness about gender equality issues hinder efforts to build understanding and empathy among individuals.

Hence, the prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) creates fear and distrust, impeding the development of healthy relationships. GBVH shatters the trust that is essential for healthy relationships. Victims of abuse often carry the scars of their experiences, living in constant fear of recurrence or further victimization. This fear can manifest as hypervigilance, social withdrawal, and a reluctance to engage in intimate relationships. (W.H.O 2002)

Women are often underrepresented in political and corporate leadership roles due to systemic barriers. Many political systems lack comprehensive policies and laws that address gender disparities. The absence of supportive policies regarding equal pay, parental leave, and representation in leadership roles perpetuates inequality. Nevertheless, societal structures contribute to a persistent gender pay gap, unequal job opportunities, and limited access to resources for women, perpetuating economic disparities between genders.

The Main Challenges to Building Inclusive Human Relations in Societies Characterized by Religious Diversity

Religious diversity can be a source of both strength and conflict. On the one hand, it can enrich societies by exposing people to different cultures and beliefs. It can also lead to division and mistrust, especially if there is a history of religious conflict.

Political Systems and Policy Biases: Political systems may favour certain religions or impose policies that disadvantage religious minorities, contributing to tensions and hindering efforts to foster mutual respect and understanding among diverse religious groups. Manipulation of religious sentiments for political gain or social control can exacerbate tensions and divisions between different religious groups, hindering efforts to create inclusive human relations.

Lack of Interfaith Dialogue Platforms: Insufficient platforms or initiatives for interfaith dialogue within societal structures limit opportunities for open communication and understanding between religious communities, impeding the building of inclusive relations. Lack of accurate information about different religions can lead to misconceptions and misunderstandings, impacting efforts to create inclusive relationships. Dialogue is a powerful tool for building understanding and trust. There are many ways to encourage dialogue, such as organizing community forums, creating interfaith initiatives, etc.

How the Challenges of Gender Inequality and Religious Diversity Impact Individuals and Communities

Discrimination based on gender or religious identity restricts access to education, employment, healthcare, and political representation. This limitation of opportunities perpetuates cycles of poverty and disempowerment, particularly affecting women and minority religious groups. It can lead to psychological distress, lower self-esteem, and a sense of exclusion among individuals affected by gender inequality and religious discrimination. This can result in a lack of confidence to challenge oppressive systems or claim their rights. It can equally affect communities, which can be polarized, leading to tensions, conflicts, or even violence between different religious groups. An-Na'im argues that Islam can be a powerful force for justice in Africa, but it can also be used to justify violence and oppression. He calls for a new understanding of Islam that is based on the values of democracy, human rights, and social justice. (An-Na'im, 1990) Segregation, distrust, and the lack of interfaith dialogue can hinder cooperation and communal harmony, inhibiting social progress and development. Communities might also uphold patriarchal norms stemming from religious beliefs, resulting in unequal treatment and limited rights for women. This can lead to segregated spaces, restricted social interactions, and reinforced gender roles, hindering communal cohesion and progress. As well as creating divisions within communities and impede cooperation among diverse groups.

Strategies for Building Inclusive Human Relations

1. Promote education about gender equality and religious tolerance: Education is essential for breaking down stereotypes and fostering understanding. Schools can play a role in teaching students about different cultures and beliefs, as well as the importance of respecting diversity.

2. Implement policies that promote inclusion: Governments can play a role in creating a more inclusive society by implementing policies that promote equality and diversity. This can include things like affirmative action programs, anti-discrimination laws, and funding for community-based organizations that work to promote inclusion.
3. Create opportunities for people from different groups to interact: There are different ways to create opportunities for people from different groups to interact with each other. This can include things like organizing community events, creating mixed-use housing developments, and supporting programs that bring people together from different backgrounds.

Building inclusive human relations is an ongoing process that requires the commitment of all members of society. By working together, we can create a more just and equitable world where everyone feels respected and valued.

Conclusion

The pursuit of inclusive human relations requires concerted efforts to address the intertwined issues of gender equality and religious diversity. While progress has been made in recognizing the importance of these aspects, substantial work remains to build societies where individuals are respected and valued regardless of their gender identity or religious affiliation. Creating inclusive environments necessitates acknowledging the complexities of intersectionality and embracing diversity as a source of strength rather than division. Education, advocacy, and policy interventions play pivotal roles in challenging discriminatory practices, fostering understanding, and promoting equal opportunities for all individuals irrespective of their gender or religious background. There are African women, like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia) and Nigeria women like, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Chimamanda Adichie, Olufunmilayo Olayinka (a Nigerian astrophysicist), Dora Akunyili of blessed memory etc who through their talents and contributions to the societies have proved that, we become what we are not because of gender but because of talents and determination. Ultimately, achieving genuine inclusivity involves collective action, where communities, governments, religious institutions, and individuals collaborate to create societies that uphold the principles of equality, respect, and dignity for everyone. This paper serves as a catalyst for further discussions, research, and actions aimed at building more inclusive societies that celebrate and embrace the diversity of gender identities and religious beliefs.

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