

Changing attitudes to gender roles

Learning outcomes

In this topic you will learn about:

- The changing role of women in the UK
- Women's rights
- How the role of men is changing
- Inequalities that remain

Changing roles

Until quite recently, most people thought that a woman's role in society was to stay at home and look after the children. It was only in 1918 that women were allowed to vote and it was not until 1970 that women were given equal pay with men. Women's roles in society have dramatically changed along with their legal rights. Now, in the twenty-first century, women have completely different lives. However, are they really equal with men?



Thomas Beatie: a 'pregnant man'

Prejudice – believing some people are inferior or superior without even knowing them.

Sexism – discriminating against people because of their gender (being male or female).

Equality – the state of everyone having equal rights regardless of their gender, race or class.

Discrimination – putting prejudice into practice and treating people less favourably because of their race, gender, colour or class.

In recent years, the traditional role of men has changed significantly too. Many men take a much more active role in the raising of children and the care of the home. Men are much more willing to cook and do the tasks which used to be seen as 'women's work'. At the extreme, there are even sex-changed males like Thomas Beatie, who are becoming pregnant.

For Discussion

In 2008, Beatie said on the Oprah Winfrey show: 'I'm a person and I have the right to have my own biological child.' Do you agree?

Although men and women have equal rights, why do you think that most of the people in the top jobs are men?

Activities

1. What do you think were the traditional roles of men and women in the UK? Suggest some more examples than the ones shown in the table below:
2. Make a list of ten words which are in common use today but might still be regarded as sexist – for example 'mankind'. Do you think that people find them offensive?
3. Can you name any jobs which should only be done by either men or women but not by both?

Breaking through

Other major developments which have brought about change in the rights and roles of for women have been the contraceptive pill and the growth of the feminist movement in the 1960s.

Now, there are more examples than ever before of women achieving great things in the arts, business, sport and politics, but inequalities still exist - girls seem to be achieving higher grades in examinations than boys, yet many women still feel that they have to work harder than men to achieve an equivalent position in the work place.

Many women blame this on career breaks, where they take time off work to bring up their babies and young children. On the other hand, some women feel that they do have equal rights and that, if a woman does not reach the top, then it is her own fault. Others claim that sexual equality is affected by the culture in which we live which is, in turn, invariably influenced by religious beliefs.

Making progress?

A century ago, only 15% of married women worked outside the home. However, after the two world wars, attitudes changed because women had to do the work of men who had gone to fight the war, and after the war ended, women's organisations campaigned for equal rights.

There was, however, resistance to these measures. Many believed that men should earn more money than women because they had families to support and that children were looked after best if raised by a mother who did not go to work.

Today in the UK, in law women and men have equal rights. Nevertheless, inequalities still exist. For instance, recent surveys have shown that rates of pay for men and women are not equal and men can still earn around 17% more. Also, the traditional roles still exist, with women doing the majority of household chores and childcare. In the workplace, there are still jobs, such as nursing, that are seen as 'female' and there are far fewer women than men in positions of real power.



For discussion

Here is a photograph of the Board of Directors of a company. How many of them are women? What does this make you think about equal opportunities? How many business leaders can you name who are women?

Activity

4. In groups, browse the websites on this page and research into gender equality in the UK. Look, for example, at differences in rates of pay. How many women are, for instance, high court judges, politicians, company directors and so on? Make a five minutes presentation of your findings to the rest of the class.

www.bbc.co.uk/history

www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001

www.equalities.gov.uk

Summary

In this topic we have examined the changing roles of men and women over the last one hundred years. In particular, we have looked at equal opportunities in employment and social standing. We concluded by looking at some of the problems that still remain to be solved.

Christian attitudes to equal rights for women

Lesson outcomes

- To understand Christian & Biblical teachings on the role and status of women
- To look at different views concerning the ordination of women priests
- To examine the reasons for Christian attitudes towards the role of women

Women and the Bible

The Bible teaches that men and women are equal:

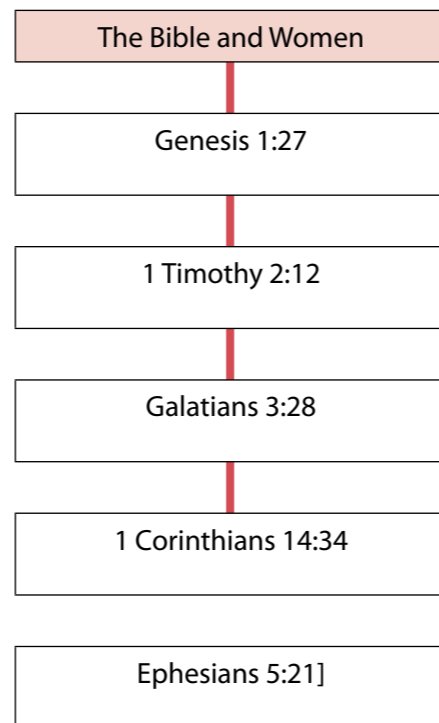
'God created man in his own image... male and female, he created them' (Genesis 1: 27)

Jesus treated women with great respect, even though the society he lived in at that time was dominated by men. Jesus had many women followers and he taught and helped them just as he helped men. They, in turn, learned from and supported him.



Activities

1. This picture shows Jesus on the way to his crucifixion. The woman is his mother, Mary. What is she doing?
2. Copy the diagram above. Then, look up the Bible verses and write down what you think each means in the boxes. What do these verses tell us about the Bible's teaching on equal rights for women?



For discussion

Why do you think that Jesus did not have any women among his twelve disciples?
Is the Bible sexist?

Women as Priests

Today, Christians believe that men and women should have equal rights, although the roles of men and women may be different. However, one serious area of inequality remains. It has only been in the last few years that women have been allowed to become priests in the Church of England – and they are still not allowed in the Roman Catholic Church. This is largely due to St Paul's teaching that:

'Women should remain silent in churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says' (1 Corinthians 14:34)

Activity

3. Do you think that women are better equipped than men to be priests? Make a list of the reasons why they could be better than men and the ways in which men might be better. Write a few sentences explaining your view.

Interpreting the Bible

For Christians in the past, women were often seen as inferior because of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, where, they believed, it was the woman who was sinful. St Paul wrote:

'For Adam was formed first, then Eve...it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.'
– 1 Timothy 2:14

However, the Bible was written at a time when male themes and ideas dominated. Today, many Christians claim that they can interpret the Bible in a new way which does greater justice to women. For example, the story of Adam and Eve can be seen not as one about a sinful woman who tempted her husband, but as a story where the man and the woman share not only their sin and punishment, but also share equally God's love.

Yet today, there are a number of Christians, such as evangelical Protestants, who interpret the Bible literally and argue that a woman is, first and foremost, a wife and mother and should stay at home. St Paul wrote:

'Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over his wife just as the Christ has authority over the Church.' – (Ephesians 5:21)

Others, however, take the view that men and women should have equal roles in the home,

For discussion

Do you think that Jesus would have agreed or disagreed with St Paul's teachings on the role of women?
Why is the appointment of women priests so controversial?

claiming that God created man and woman equally.

Different skills to offer

Many Christians today claim that the reason Jesus did not have any women among the twelve disciples was due to the culture of the day – women simply could not be seen to travel with men and certainly could not leave their children and families.

Today, things are very different and Christians who are in favour of having women as priests highlight the very different skills that they can offer to their congregations. They believe that women are often able to offer more loving and sympathetic care to people, particularly to other women and young people who are suffering, than male priests can.

For discussion

Is it right that Biblical commandments, written so long ago, should still apply today?

ResultsPlus Build Better Answers

Question: Describe different attitudes to the roles of men and women in Christianity. (6 marks)

Basic, 1-2 mark answers

List one or two differing attitudes, such as that Roman Catholics believe women should not become religious leaders, whereas many Protestants do.

Good, 3-4 mark answers

Also provide some detail about the nature of each attitude.

Excellent, 5-6 mark answers

Compare three attitudes with some detail, including for example what Evangelical Protestants believe.

Muslim attitudes towards equal rights for women

Lesson outcomes

In this topic you will learn about:

- Islamic teaching about the role of women.
- The traditional role of women in Islam.
- Modern Islamic views on the role of women.

Qur'an – the holy book of Islam

Hadith – the sayings of the Prophet

Equal but different?

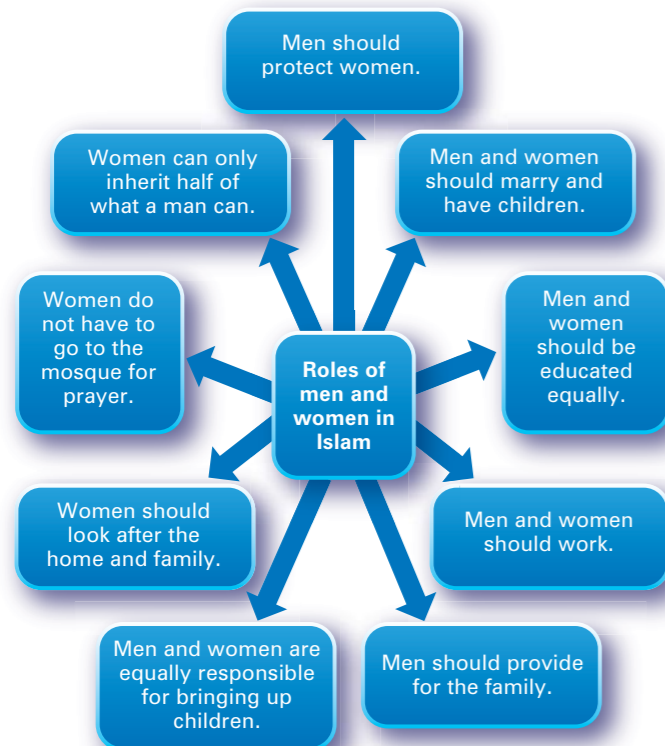
Islam teaches that men and women are equal and created by God:

'All people are equal...as the teeth of a comb.' (Hadith).

Traditionally in Islam, men and women are seen as having different roles. The Qur'an teaches that God made men stronger and so they should protect women, who, in their turn, are required to have children.



For many people in Britain, clothing is thought to be the area which explains the Muslim attitude to women.



For discussion

What conclusions do you come to when you look at the two women in the photo? What are the arguments for and against what each woman in the picture has chosen to wear?

Activity

1. Look at the spider diagram. Write down a list of points which show that men and women are the same and another list showing where they are different. Are there any other you could add to the list?

'Women have the same rights in relation to their husbands as are expected in all decency of them; while men stand a step above them – Surah 2:228

Clothing

The Qur'an states that both men and women should dress modestly. Men must wear loose clothing and must always be covered from the navel to the knee in public. They should not wear tight or revealing clothing. The clothing of women is more controversial and the requirement of dressing modestly is interpreted in different ways by Muslim women. In traditional Islam, women are expected to cover their heads and bodies:

"O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close around them. That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever forgiving, merciful." (Surah 33:59)

Many Muslim women in the UK choose to wear loose-fitting Western style dress with a headscarf or **hijab** to cover the hair and shoulders. Others may wear a **burqa** when outside the home. This is a full-length, loose-fitting garment, designed so that even the outline of a woman's body cannot be seen. This is usually worn with a veil (**niqab**) to cover the face.

There is much controversy about covering. Some argue that it is outdated and that any identification of religious belief in public should be discouraged in order to maintain an equal and unprejudiced society. However, many Muslim women who wear the niqab/burqa or hijab believe that it gives them a degree of public privacy and acts as a symbol of their religious faith.



Activities

2. In what ways are men and women in Islam regarded as (a) equal and (b) unequal?
3. Do you agree with the view expressed by the women in the photograph? Give reasons.
4. Some countries believe that it is wrong for people to wear clothes in the workplace which highlight their faith. Do you agree?

Worship

In religious worship in the home, the family pray together with the father leading. However, in the mosque, women are separated from the men. Many modern Muslim women oppose this on the grounds that the Prophet encouraged men and women to worship in the mosque and that there were many female leaders in the early stages of Islam. The **Hadith** states:

'The search for knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, male or female.'

Muslim women are free to work but women are entitled to expect that their husbands will provide for them even if they are wealthy. For this reason, men are given 'a degree of advantage' over women (Surah 2:228) because they have the responsibility for providing for the family. Hence, women can only inherit half as much as men.

Activities

5. Is it right that a wealthy rich Muslim woman should still be provided for by her husband?
6. What 'degree of advantage' do men have over women?



When asked to explain different attitudes to the role of women in the Muslim community, many students incorrectly contrast the roles of men and women.