

# Religion and gender equality

The Catholics ban women from their clergy while their Anglican brethren have allowed them - recently and grudgingly - to become priests... but not bishops.

Orthodox Jews segregate men and women during religious services and many Muslims sects don't allow women into prayers at all and even segregate weddings!

Secularists don't really care too much about how religious groups organise themselves. We merely look on with some amusement... or horror.

But when real harm is done to real people and religious quirks impact on wider society, then we have a duty to sit up and take notice. In few areas is the negative impact of religion on human rights more in evidence than in issues involving women - who many religions view as second-class citizens.

Even in the UK - where women's equality is guaranteed by statute - religious groups find ways to get around the law.

## Secular Charter

### The creation of a just and equitable secular society in Britain

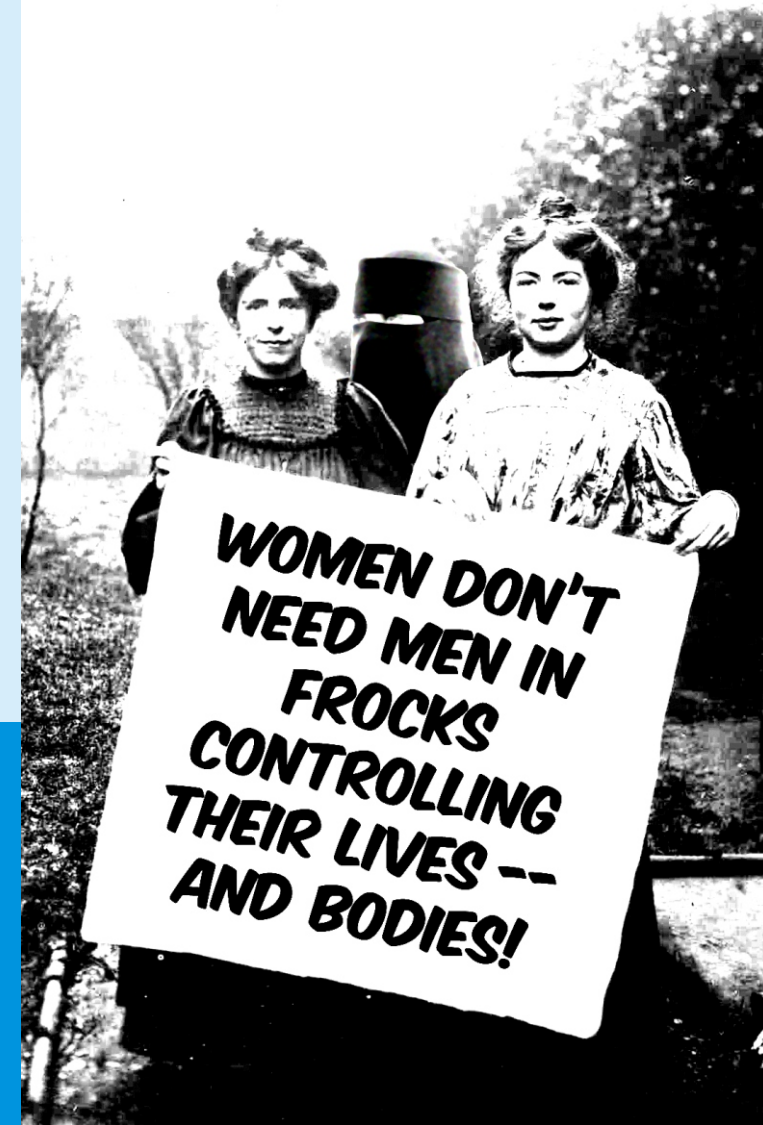
The National Secular Society seeks a society in which religion and the State are distinctly separated, and where human rights always take precedence over religious demands. We would like to see the following ten objectives incorporated into a written, secular constitution:

- There should be no established state religion.
- The state should not fund religious activities.
- The state should not fund religious proselytising in any form and the provision of all services using public money should be religiously neutral.
- The state should not prescribe, proscribe, or amend religious doctrine.
- The state should not interfere in religious hierarchies, nor interfere in issues strictly related to membership.
- No action by the state should have the primary effect of engaging in religious practice.
- No state action should have the primary effect of restricting religious practice.
- The state should not express any religious beliefs, or in any publication, speech, or other implement of state power such as currency, sworn testimony, oath of fealty to the state, or endorsements of national pride. The state should not imply any derivation of authority from any religious authority, nor should it express temporal supremacy in relation to religious belief or practice.
- Political leaders should not express religious preferences in the course of their duties.
- No religion or denomination should have the power to prescribe, proscribe, or amend civil or common law.

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# Religion... and the Oppression of Women



# Religion and the Oppression of Women

In 1995, following the Beijing Conference on Women, the Vatican took issue with the concept of "women's rights to control their own sexuality" and "women's right to control their...fertility", asserting that these rights should be understood to refer only to "the responsible use of sexuality within marriage."

After millennia of religious gender-oppression, we are no further away from casting off the sexist demands of patriarchal theology even if their power and influence is much diminished - at least in western democracies.

As we explore in the side bar, this obsession with controlling women seems to stem from the desire by religious authorities (who are almost always men) to control fertility, or - as they see it - the very source of life. This mania has led to untold suffering by women throughout the ages and across cultures. And it is still with us.

The desire to control fertility has necessarily meant the need to control women themselves. Consequently, few religions treat women as equals and - since religion and state were intertwined for most of human history - this in turn has meant the relegation of women to second-class citizenship.

In parts of the Islamic World - following the Cairo Declaration, that ersatz 'human rights' document' - women are seen as needing the protection of men, which, in legal terms, means they are not dissimilar to children in status.

In many cases, the legal inferiority of woman is rendered visible by forcing women to wear submissive clothing, often

reinforcing the notion of "women as property". Those tempted to write this off as mere rhetoric should consider that in the most fundamentally Islamic countries, for example, an "unfaithful" woman can face death by stoning or flogging.

As secularists, we don't wish to get involved in the internal affairs of religions. Whether, for example, the Church of England approves women vicars but not bishops, is entirely up to them. But it certainly is everyone's business when religious groups campaign to influence the law with regards to the rights of citizens.

It surely cannot be right that a doctor working for the NHS can make medical decisions based on their own religious convictions rather than the needs of the patient.

Nor can it be right that religious courts are given the State's stamp of approval when there are pressing questions about whether women will get a fair hearing in matters of divorce and child custody or that evidence of domestic violence will be taken seriously. It is not unreasonable to ask how Sharia courts in the UK will function when, theologically speaking, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's.

In the case of Islam, women's rights activists have a grave cause for concern: religion is increasingly being used as an argument to reverse gains feminists have made over the decades. Gender segregation is making a come-back and horrified critics are denounced as 'Islamophobic'.

**Religion is naturally reactionary. The stronger human rights culture grows, the clearer the fault lines are.**

## Maimed by religion

"Whoever finds it serving the interest of his daughters should do it, and I personally support this under the current circumstances in the modern world." With that statement, leading Islamic scholar Yusuf al Qaradawi squandered the opportunity to speak out against a monstrous practice. Worse, while saying it was "not obligatory", he appeared to endorse it nonetheless. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is sometimes called "female circumcision" but it has very little in common with the male version. It is designed to rob a woman of all sexual sensation by cutting out part of the clitoris and labia to discourage "immoral behaviour". It is these (sexual) temptations of the "modern world" that Qaradawi was talking about.

## Dressed up Faith

Secularists are generally not concerned with the strange clothing that religious people choose of their own free will to inflict upon themselves. However, the testimony of many women - particularly in the Muslim community - is that patriarchal forces within some communities - fathers, uncles, brothers, husbands, and even sons - rigidly enforce dress codes in an oppressive way, and often with violence.

On a hot day, how can one look upon the scene of a woman draped in layers of black cloth covering all but her eyes while her male relatives are dressed in comfortable summer fashions and honestly think that this is a normal situation? It is clearly designed to marginalise women and cut them off from wider society.

## Controlling women by controlling their bodies

One might be forgiven for thinking that religion treats women as little more than machines for breeding the faithful. Religious leaders - almost always men - from across many different faiths are obsessed both with ensuring that nothing stands in the path of a man's sperm on its way to fertilising a woman's egg. When it does, even more pressure is brought to bear to ensure she carries it to term.

Many religious sects rage against contraception. Some religious doctors and pharmacists refuse to supply women with either contraceptive pills or devices. Many more will certainly not supply a "morning after" pill if a woman fears she may have become pregnant.

Worse, some groups - notably the Catholic Church - are even opposed to condoms. They won't even let men take responsibility for contraception because they say it promotes immoral sexual behaviour. It doesn't seem to move them in the slightest that campaigning against condoms puts women at risk not only of unwanted pregnancies but also of life-threatening sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS.

Men make the rules, but all too often it is not men who have to deal with the consequences of pregnancy. Many men abscond leaving women to struggle on their own. Often having a child forces women to have to give up chances of education or career. Yet it is primarily men who make the decisions. Not only that, frequently the decisions are made not on practical grounds, but on religious grounds.

Things heat up even further when contraception is no longer the issue and abortion is brought forward as an option. The subject seems to push some religious extremists even further towards madness. In some cases, doctors providing abortion services have been murdered. Ultra-emotive language like "the genocide of the unborn" is used. Extremists are opposed to abortion even in cases where a woman or pubescent girl has been raped, the foetus is badly deformed, or when the mother's life is in danger.

Religious groups think they have been commanded to "go forth and multiply" and appear to think that this means "at all costs" - even if it means sacrificing the rights - and sometimes lives - of women.

**A leading 21st Century medical authority on sex and reproduction.**

