

Gender Equality

EQUALITY of gender remains a feature which has singled out Zoroastrians from their compatriots throughout history.

In the Gathas, Zoroaster specifically exhorts men and women to use their own unclouded judgement to decide if what he, Zoroaster, advocates has a relevant message for them. It is particularly noteworthy that throughout the Gathas he addresses both men and women, indicating that they are partners in trying to increase the amount of goodness and trying to defeat the forces of darkness. This equality of address implies respect towards both sexes and a belief in the competence of both. Indeed, lack of gender prejudice is one of the fundamental tenets of Zoroastrianism and is seen in societal organisation, in later texts, in the priesthood and also in the wedding liturgy.

A woman's willingness to speak her views in the presence of her partner and for those views to be accepted as valid was characteristic and still is. In every sense the Zoroastrian woman has maintained her equality of position in society and, where necessary, has been head of the household and this not necessarily in the absence of her husband. Where husband have been absent or, in the case of widowhood, women have made decisions affecting land sales inheritances, harvesting times, educational choices, marriage partners for off-spring etc. Zoroastrian women have also been queens as attested in the late Sassanian period.

Since the early 20th century when girls' schools were opened for Zoroastrians, women have shown their competence in every sphere by achieving high qualifications and careers in all domains where men have succeeded. A particularly noteworthy feature in this sphere extends to the realm of the priesthood – texts exist from antiquity which indicate without any doubt that women were considered competent and worthy to attend priestly college and to officiate and administer to the religious needs of their communities. In keeping with this long standing custom which fell into disuse over the past centuries but which has been revived in Iran, recently 8 female priestesses have been ordained and now officiate at religious events.

It is therefore evident that with the degree of gender equality demonstrated in so many spheres, it can only follow that in inheritance issues or other rights, women and men stand shoulder to shoulder. It is a matter of regret that some people fail to grasp this basic principle of equality and seek to differentiate between the rights of marrying out males and females, attributing all entitlements to men only.