

# **WORLD: Discrimination against women isn't unique to any one religion**

*We must call out inequality wherever we see it.*

By Graham Perrett

Huffington Post (13.03.2017) – <http://huff.to/2mIfD03> – It's sometimes difficult, looking from a male perspective, to immediately notice all of the ways that women are treated less equally than men in so many aspects of their lives. There are the obvious ones: the gender pay gap and lower levels of representation in public life, that no-one could miss, but sometimes we just don't see inequality for what it is.

Religious custom can be so embedded, for so long, that many men fail to even recognise it as inequality. That can be the problem. From insisting that women cover their heads, to refusing to shake women's hands, women have been, and still are, treated as less than men by most religions, not just Islam.

Arguably, gender inequality continues to be the basis of much religious hierarchical power, irrespective of whether you are Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist.

From the crystal clear vision of hindsight, I can now see the inequality I accepted as normal in my Catholic upbringing.

When I was a very young boy, the women and girls I attended mass with on Sundays were obliged to wear a veil, called a mantilla, on their heads. This rule, derived from The Bible (Corinthians 11:2-16) and included in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, stated that men, when in a church or outside a church, should be bare headed, but women must cover their head and dress modestly. After I'd finished high school the 1983 Code of Canon Law overturned that rule.

Amazingly, until 1994 women were not permitted to be altar servers during Catholic Mass. This privilege was reserved only for boys and men.

Catholic women are still treated very differently if they choose to follow a religious life. Women cannot be ordained as priests in the Catholic Church, but they are permitted to join an Order as a consecrated religious. Nuns devote themselves to caring for the sick, homeless, refugees, prisoners and other people in need. Many Australians, including me, have benefited from the care and education delivered by these wonderful women.

But even religious organisations, like all powerful organisations, cannot and should not ignore inequality.

No more than we should turn a blind eye to any institution that unnecessarily permits inequality, whether it is in the hierarchical structure of the organisation itself or whether it is allowing boys to avoid politely shaking the hand of a woman at a formal function.

But it is hypocritical for people belonging to any of the organised religions to point their finger only at Islam for treating women unequally. Only he who is without sin should cast the first stone.

Often the behaviour is not intended to demean women. Nevertheless, that does not excuse the behaviour but may provide the opportunity to find a solution.

Demonising all or any particular religion is also not the answer.

Slowly, very slowly, religious tradition is aligning with modern societal norms. The treatment of women in organised religion has come a long way. However, I would suggest not yet far enough and certainly not yet quickly enough.

Signs and symbols are important. They have always been important and are especially so when powerful organisations sanction inequality.

Sensible progressives need to call out inequality wherever we see it; whether it is in our schools; in our churches, mosques, temples or synagogues; or in our workplaces. Sometimes, particularly men who are entrenched in the patriarchal hierarchy, are simply blind to inequality until someone points it out to them.

.....

**If you want to be regularly informed about different**

violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

*Also:*

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries:  
<http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/womens-rights-gender-equality/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various  
faiths in 20  
countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>