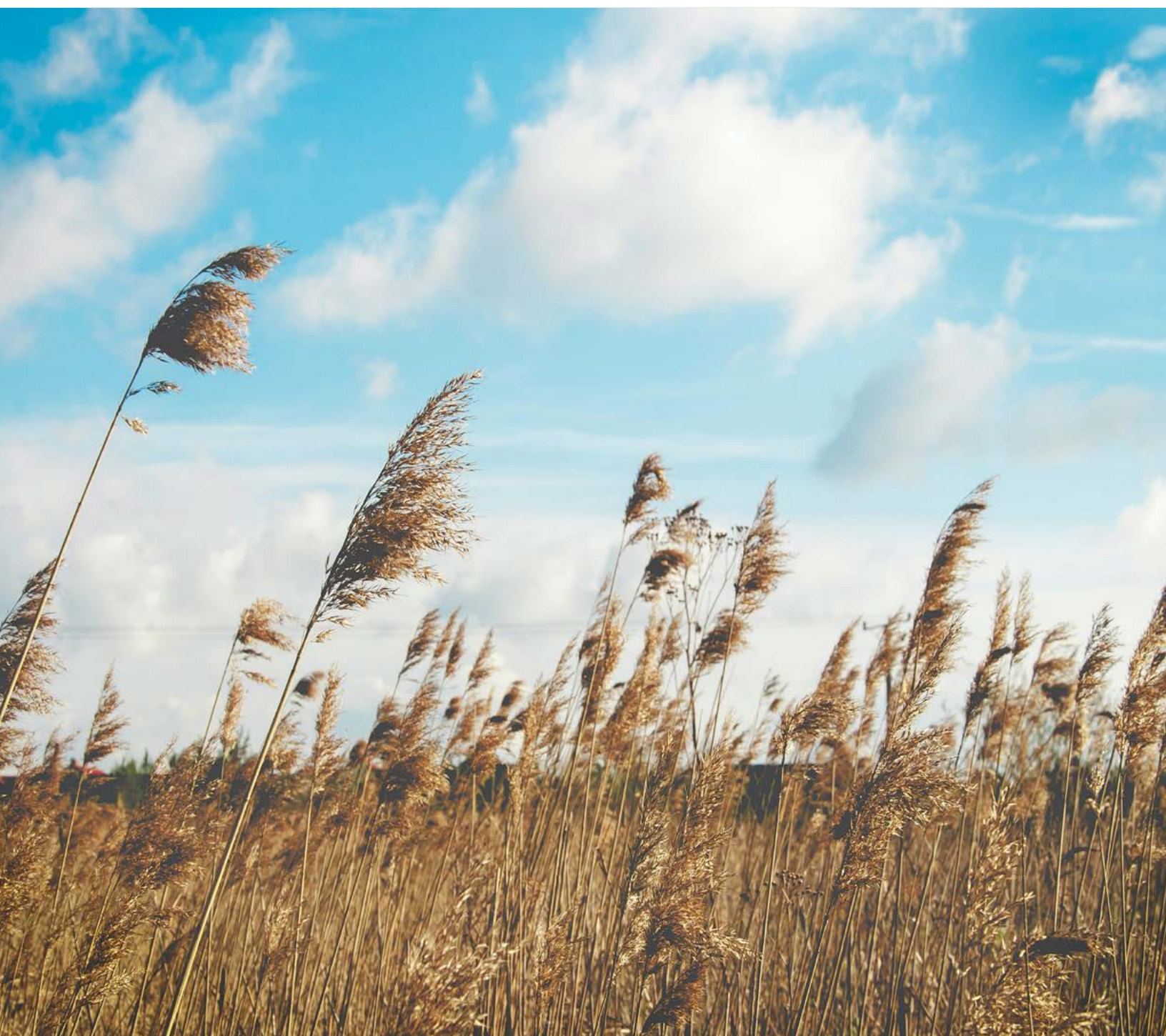


Women & Gender in Sikhi

State of the Panth, Report 9

April 2023



State of the Panth

State of the Panth series is a report on Sikh matters presented by the Sikh Research Institute to the global Sikh community. The series reports on matters affecting either a large section of the Sikh Nation or a perspective on critical issues facing the human race at large. It surveys the self-identified Sikhs on their stances. It outlines a Sikh perspective based on *Gurmat* (the Guru's Way) traditions of *Bani* (wisdom), *Tavarikh* (history), and *Rahit* (lifestyle). It offers recommendations for the individual Sikhs and Sikh institutions in best practice approach to strengthen the bonds within the community.

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Summary

Women's issues and the issues of gender as it applies to all gender identities are being grappled with globally. These issues have existed throughout history, and as time goes on, they change shape. Those who identify as women are using their voices to bring awareness to issues that matter to them, but every community has a long way to go. How did the Sikh Gurus address women's issues? How did they frame or reframe gender? Regarding women's and gender issues within the *Panth* (Sikh collective) today, why is there a disparity between precept and practice, and how do we close that gap?

This report aims to understand and explore Sikh conceptions of women and gender, responses to gender-based inequality and oppression, and framings of masculinity. The report explores the topics of women and gender from a Gurmat (or Guru's Way) perspective, as inferred from *Bani* (wisdom), *Tavarikh* (history), and *Rahit* (lifestyle).

The Bani section delves into when and how women are generally invoked in primary sources regarding cultural norms that subjugate them, when and how specific women are invoked, and what vocabulary is used to refer to them. It also explores how the feminine voice is used in Bani, what Bani says about the masculine, and what Bani says about gender. The Tavarikh section explores what Sikh history can tell us about how women were perceived in the larger culture versus within the Panth, how the Gurus addressed the treatment of women in the larger culture, and which women took on public leadership roles in the Guru and post-Guru periods. The Rahit section explores what Sikh codes of conduct say about women and gender and how these codes translate into action. It also offers an overview of current global lived realities by focusing on India and the top five diasporic Sikh communities worldwide.

A global survey included in the report was responded to by more than 689 self-identified Sikhs from 21 different countries. Its purpose was to gain insights into how Sikhs worldwide understand gender equality, masculinity, and feminism within Sikh frameworks and in their own relationships with their gender identity. The majority of respondents (86%) understand that women and men may be the same or different, but they are equal with no gender-specific roles. An even greater majority of respondents (89%) believe that feminist advocacy is not anti-Sikh, meaning that the majority of respondents believe Sikhi and feminist advocacy are not at odds with one another. The majority of respondents (52%) still think on some level within the binary but nevertheless showed an understanding of gender as a socially constructed category. An overwhelming majority of respondents (96%) believe that all Sikhs, regardless of gender identity, are responsible for addressing women and gender issues, pointing to an understanding of these issues as a Panthic problem that requires the cooperation and investment of the Panth to solve.

This report makes recommendations based on Gurmat that can be used by individuals and institutions to understand Sikh conceptions of women and gender better and to address disparities in precept and practice.

Introduction

Women's issues and the issues of gender as it applies to all gender identities have existed throughout history. Those who identify as women are gaining platforms and using their voices to bring awareness to issues that matter to them. At the same time, the backlash experienced for speaking up is swift and widespread, and every community has a long way to go. How did the Sikh Gurus appreciate women and women's issues? How did they appreciate gender? How do we understand women's and gender issues within the *Panth* (Sikh collective) today? We know that some Sikh practices are not in line with doctrine, so why is there a disparity, and how do we close that gap?

We acknowledge that there exist traditional understandings of gender and gendered roles involving women as central to conversations around grihast, or householding, and as those who are "of the home" and most representative of the home as mothers and wives. We acknowledge that traditional understandings exist that the differences between men and women are "complementary" and ought to translate into a difference in role and expectation. In this report, we are acknowledging and offering additional perspectives.

We acknowledge that previous popular understandings equated gender and sex and articulated an understanding of gender as rooted in biology. This prior understanding is no longer primarily accepted by medical professionals or academics in the medical and social sciences. For this report, when women are mentioned, we refer to all who identify as women, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth. When we discuss gender, we are referring to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed (i.e., a social definition of gender). It includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society (i.e., what role gender serves in that society) and can change in meaning over time (i.e., which characteristics and behaviors people associate with specific categories of gender). When we refer to gender identity, we refer to one's internal experience and naming one's gender. While one's gender identity is informed by how one experiences external social expectations of gender being applied to them, we use gender identity to refer to one's internal experiences specifically. This is an individual's personal sense of having a particular gender. One's gender identity can correspond to or differ from the sex one was assigned at birth. In this sense, every person has their own unique gender identity, but people may use more common identities to describe their gender identity, such as "cisgender" or "transgender." In this report, when we refer to women, we refer to those who identify as women.



A survey of 689 self-identified Sikhs from 21 countries was conducted to gain insights into Sikh understandings of women and gender. Responses included four areas of emphasis:

1. Making a conscious effort toward equal representation in all spheres – education, leadership, and religious practice by supporting, encouraging, and engaging women and girls.
2. Locating the importance of individual work and family responsibility through the gender dynamics produced at home.
3. Using gender-neutral language in Bani translations and Sikh spaces more generally, being respectful in talking about those who identify as women across various experiences, and engaging in non-sexist religious practices.
4. Rooting in Sikh principles on gender and equality rather than culture or external ideas of women and gender, increasing reliance on Sikh perspective and framework, and practicing what we preach.


This report makes recommendations based on Gurmat (the Guru's Way) as inferred from Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history), and Rahit (lifestyle) that can be used by individuals and institutions to understand Sikh conceptions of women and gender better and to address disparities in precept and practice.

Bani Wisdom

Bani is the Wisdom, and the Wisdom is the Guru. One builds one's understanding of the Wisdom on the *Sabad* (word-sounds of the Wisdom). Sabads are also verses; the collection of Sabads is the *bani* (utterances or teachings). We actively engage with and learn about the *Bani* in the *Guru Granth Sahib* – the Sikh scriptural canon, the religious text, the charter, or the manifesto. *Bani* is primarily uttered in the feminine voice. This is the voice of devotion to the Formless One, the one without gender, *IkOankar* (One Universal Integrative Force, 1Force, the One). There is a clear value placed on women and the feminine in *Bani* through the adoption of the feminine voice and addressing women's issues. How did the Sikh Gurus appreciate women and women's issues? How did they appreciate gender? To answer these questions, one must first understand how the Gurus invoked women *generally*, how they invoked specific women, how they used the female or feminine voice, and how they invoked the gender binary in *Bani*. It is also important to understand the disruptions they offer through these invocations.

When and how are women generally invoked in *Bani* regarding cultural norms that subjugate them?

Sikhs often invoke a line from Guru Nanak (1469–1539) uttered in *Asa Ki Var*, or Song of Hope, when discussing women generally. The famously quoted line usually reads, "Why call her bad? From her, kings are born," but this line is even more powerful when viewed in context. To understand this in its entirety, we must first look at one of the *Pauris* (lyrical stanzas) that precedes it, which discusses "purity" and "impurity," a paradigm that is often used as justification for the oppression and exclusion of women:



*Just as menstruation repeatedly comes to a woman [and she continuously bleeds,
in the same way] impurity abides in the mouth of the impure,
[from which lies are spoken, due to which one] experiences humiliation every day.
These [people] cannot be called pure, who are seated, having [only] washed the body.
O Nanak! Pure are they alone, in whose heart is residing That IkOankar.ⁱ*

— Guru Granth Sahib 472

Guru Nanak describes the menstrual cycle and various rituals that come along with that natural cycle to refer to broader ideas of purity versus impurity. This verse is often misunderstood as a statement solely on menstrual cycles rather than a larger statement on purity. The context of this verse is the practice of

sirnavani, or washing the head. Per the *Sanatan* (old Hindu) religious texts, a woman undergoing her menstrual cycle must bathe on the fourth day, wash her hair, and then see her husband's face and eat food. This ritual is meant to purify the woman during what is deemed to be her impure state, caused by the natural experience of menstruation.¹

Guru Nanak asks, how one can call a woman impure if this thing that is deemed "impure" (menstruation) visits a woman periodically and naturally. In contrast, the Guru refers to those Brahmin (Hindu priest) men who call women impure while continuing to wash their mouths with water, attempting to purify themselves ceremonially. These Brahmins are full of hypocrisy, as their own mouths are filled with lies, dirt, and filth.

There are perpetual distinctions of purity and impurity that allow for people, especially women, to be policed. The Guru says that those who set these standards of purity are not pure in the ways that matter. Purity does not come from washing oneself in particular waters, going through certain ceremonies and rituals at certain times, or offering certain things to one's ancestors. Purity comes when IkOankar, the One, resides in the mind. Thus, the designation of women as impure due to their menstrual cycles is challenged. In this context, we can better understand the following excerpt from the nineteenth stanza of Asa ki Var:

*From a woman [one] takes birth, from a woman [one is] formed.
With a woman is betrothal and marriage.
From a woman occurs friendship [with others]; from a woman,
the process [of the world] is carried on.
[When the first] woman dies, [a second] woman is sought;
only with a woman is the foundation of a disciplined household life laid.
[Then] why call her bad, from whom [even] kings are born.
From a woman alone, a woman is born; without a woman,
no one [is born]. Nanak! [Only] that true One is [existing] without a woman.
The mouth with which [IkOankar] is always praised,
[that face is adorned with] four grains of fortunes.
Nanak! [Only] those [who praise IkOankar] are of radiant faces in that true Court.ⁱⁱ*

— Guru Granth Sahib 473



Here, Guru Nanak says that all beings are made from a woman's blood and come into being through her, and it is to a woman that many are betrothed and married. Through a woman, friendship is extended in the form of relationships, and through a woman, the world system is furthered. Guru Nanak describes the woman as the *bhand*, a vessel in which so much is held, from which so much flows. The famous line often quoted usually reads, "Why call her bad? From her, kings are born," but this line is merely the last example in a list of examples employed to make the larger point that the woman is the nucleus of society – not just in the private sphere but also in the public and political sphere. Women are those around whom all of society is centered. This is a statement about every role in society getting its start from women, every code of society, every social system, every relationship, and every system of governance because the great

rulers (highest political potentialities) come from women. This is a larger statement that all potentialities are rooted in the woman. Nothing happens without her. This is, of course, in reference to human relationships and interactions, as the ultimate source of all potentiality is IkOankar.

The Guru says that IkOankar, the Eternal One, is the ultimate source of all potentiality, and the mouth which praises the One and condemns women is not really a mouth that is praising the One at all. The Guru refers to four grains of fortune, a particular unit of measurement meant to denote luck or much good fortune. The Guru says that the mouth with which IkOankar is always praised is very fortunate. Only those individuals who praise IkOankar are honored in the eternal court of IkOankar. That dichotomy of putting down women and praising men will continue until our mouths are forever living in the praise, our minds are focused on the praise, and Nam (Identification with IkOankar, the One) is brought into our connection with IkOankar. Nam helps us feel IkOankar in the world around us, our interactions with others, our thoughts, and our behaviors. It creates a culture of Identification that we can live in and maintain. Through this culture of Identification, hypocritical condemnation of anyone leaves our mouths forever. Truly praising IkOankar means having no more differentiations in our worldview. This is a direct statement on the South Asian religious and Semitic contexts – the woman is considered below the lowest caste in brahminical codes. In Semitic traditions, she is described as the weaker vessel (so here, the use of bhand, describing a woman as a vessel, seems to be a reference to Semitic framing).

The Guru's references to women at large take into account the cultural context in which the Wisdom is being uttered. Women are subjugated as potentially polluting and as property of men with no agency to make decisions for their own lives and with no real social value outside of their value as property (both as reproductive property and as familial property). These elements of the prevailing social norms and understandings are addressed in Bani – the absurdity of deeming a natural human cycle "impure" and the importance of women as central to the perpetuation of humans on earth through their creative power and as central to all relationships that exist in society.

The Guru also references the societal norm and cultural and religious practice of sati, or coerced immolation, where a widow would sacrifice herself by throwing her body onto her deceased husband's funeral pyre:



*Comes in the Dark-Ignorance Age to unite,
Enjoys the enjoyment as per the order.¹
Cannot be with the Beloved 1-Charmer by burning herself,
Becomes Sati — immolates herself — to unite. 1. Pause-reflect.
Goes and burns herself in mental stubbornness, imitating others.
Cannot be in the company of the Beloved, wanders in many life-cycles.²
Follows the command of the Beloved, virtuous and self-restraint;
That woman does not feel the pain of the Death-Agent.³
Nanak proclaims: Those who recognize the Supreme Being as the Lover,
That Sati is great, is acceptable in the Court.^{4.30.99.}ⁱⁱⁱ*

— Guru Granth Sahib 185

Sati was a Hindu goddess who self-immolated because she could not bear her father's humiliation of her and her husband. The term Sati was originally interpreted as "chaste woman." Sati appears in Hindi and Sanskrit texts, where it is synonymous with "good wife," so the term "Sati" originally is used to describe the woman rather than the rite.² When referring to the practice of sati, the word will not be capitalized. When referring to the designation of a woman as Sati, the word will be capitalized.

The Guru reframes the practice of sati in the context of all seekers as the brides of the One Divine Spouse, IkOankar. All human beings are feminine beings, and all people are in the dark ages, the age of ignorance. In Indic Karma systems, the feminine beings unite with the Spouse with a connotation due to previous associations. People enjoy the pleasures of this world only when the order of the One permits it. The Guru says that union with the One will not occur by the human-brides burning themselves. Identifying with women, the Guru says, the bride throws herself on the funeral pyre of her husband because the prevailing system has said this is the way she can unite with him as per previous associations.

Through this larger reframing in which the bride is the human-seeker, and the husband is the Divine, IkOankar, the Guru asks how the human-bride will be able to unite with the One if she burns herself. This human-bride is described as the one who gives in to peer and societal pressure and imitates what others are doing. She jumps into the funeral pyre and burns her body, so how can her body enjoy the compassion of the beloved Spouse, IkOankar, for which this life was gifted? She will continue to wander in this doubt, in this life, and in subsequent lives. The cycle will continue until she breaks it, and that requires her to break from societal norms. The ones of sweet virtuous self-restraint and disciplined behavior follow the One's command, for the One is Beloved for them. And that woman, that seeker, is not touched by pain, the fear of death, or its agent. So the Guru urges women not to consider their worldly husbands their "god." Instead, *all* people ought to consider the One as their Beloved-Spouse. Through this, seekers will radiate and be celebrated in the Divine World, forgetting the dark-ignorant norms of the physical world.

There are other references to sati that address this practice and reframe it in the context of the Sikh paradigm, where all people are the feminine brides, and the One is the Divine Husband:

*Those who burn themselves with funeral pyres are not to be called Satis.
Nanak: Those who die due to the wound of separation are to be known as Satis.1*

— Guru Granth Sahib 185



In the South Asian world, women who either threw themselves or were forcibly thrown onto the funeral pyres of their husbands and burned alive were called Satis. This practice was considered a way for widows to retain their honor. But it is a product of the torture and torment of a patriarchal society that treats men as property owners of women and of a casteist society that demands certain people's honor be maintained above all else, including through death. It implies that a wife or wives have no life or desire of their own and are limited to their husband's life span.

Guru Amardas (1479-1574) disrupts this religious, social, and cultural norm by saying it is the separation between the seeker as the bride and IkOankar as the Divine Spouse, the longing for the beloved Spouse that "burns" us, wounds us, and makes us real Satis. The Guru continues to reframe this practice:

*They are also known as Satis, who remain virtuous and content.
They serve their own Sai and get up daily to take care."*

— Guru Granth Sahib 787



Customarily, the woman or wife is expected to behave as prescribed by the norms of the patriarchal society, Hindu elite, upper class, or ruling strata. This is not to say that there were no norms in other communities that were and continue to be prescribed to women, regardless of class. Instead, the norms of the upper class and ruling strata become the larger hegemonic norms in a society. According to these hegemonic norms, the wife is to consider her husband as Sai (Owner, Sovereign) and serve him. Guru Amardas disrupts all of these notions and redefines everything about a human being's behavior in relation to the One, the true Spouse. This standard of behavior is for everyone seeking a relationship with the One, regardless of gender identity. The real Sai is the One, and the seeker gets up in the morning to remember that Sai. The Guru continues in his reframing:

*Those Mahelis who burn in the fire with their husbands,
If they know their own husband, then bear the pain on the body.
Nanak: Why shall those who do not know their husband burn in the fire?
Whether [they] live or die, they run away from far.^{vi}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 787



Maheli is of the Mahal (of the home or palace) and refers to wives at home. The women of the home (Mahelis) serve their husbands in the home while they are alive. When their husbands die, they serve them by going with them in death (throwing themselves onto the funeral pyre). Society says a woman is a true Maheli if she is with her husband in joy and pain and considers her husband her own. This intimate and devoted relationship makes a Maheli willing to endure pain. But the Guru asks, what of those wives who are not close to their husbands? What of those wives who do not consider their husbands their own? Why should they endure the pain of becoming Satis to perform a closeness that is not real?

The Guru redefines sati as more of an internal element of the relationship between husband and wife rather than a performance of closeness through painful self-immolation. Those who know their husbands can choose to bear the pain of that closeness physically, but those who do not know their husbands – who have no close relationship with them – do not need to perform a closeness and intimacy that is not real.

The Guru also touches on widowhood. As a part of the societal reinforcement for sati is the belief that widows are of no value and have no ability to remarry or live a life outside of being “owned” by their husbands. The Guru reframes widowhood to be about something vaster – not the loss of a worldly husband, but the loss of focused devotion and connection to the Divine Husband, IkOankar:

*That Husband-Being is eternal, is forever eternal, neither dies nor leaves.
The ignorant wife-being wanders misled, sits widow-like in other love.
Sits widow-like in other love, feels the pain attached to Maya,
age-time passes, body dies-withers.
Whatever came, everything will go; feel the pain in other love.
Does not perceive Death-Agent, longs for Maya in the world,
and attaches consciousness to greed and avarice.
That Husband-Being is eternal, is forever eternal, neither dies nor leaves.^{vii}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 583



The Guru redefines the widow to be the human being who is dead in their relationship with the One, the Divine Spouse, because of being entangled in other loves in this world. This kind of widow feels the pain of being in Maya, or illusion, due to the attachment to temporary materials and transient relationships. It is the duality that makes us sit widow-like and causes pain. This widowhood of separation from the One is what matters, not worldly widowhood caused by sati.

Sati and widow-remarriage emerged as significant concerns for the colonial period reform movement in India, but the Gurus in the Guru Granth Sahib addressed these practices about two hundred years before that. The reform movements of the colonial period focused on these two major problems due to their impact on privileged sections of society. Sati was not practiced by common masses – it was performed by women of affluent classes – landowners in particular. During these reforms, the cause of common women of lower castes was completely left out. It is thus worth emphasizing that the Gurus addressed the cases and causes of women of the lower castes, sex workers, and other less privileged members of society long before others addressed these causes.

The Guru also addresses kurimar, or female infanticide:

*[In the prevailing culture,] As killing a Brahmin, a cow, a girl-child,
and eating rice-food of an immoral person is considered very disgraceful,
leprosy-like, and bad-behavior {and doing so} always, always brings arrogance;
Nanak: so many [vices] cling to the person who forgets One Nam.
Burn-discard all intellect; one essence wisdom remains.^{viii}*


— Guru Granth Sahib 1413



Here, the most common killings that took place in the Guru period as a part of the larger cultural practice are listed. The Guru writes that all of this happens due to the forgetting of Nam. Here, the Guru draws clear moral lines and says that committing female infanticide is disgraceful and bad behavior caused by the forgetting of Nam. It is in that forgetfulness that vices cling to a person.

When and how are specific women invoked in Bani?

Specific female figures are invoked in Bani, some in the context of Indic mythology and one particular figure in Sikh history. One of Bani's most commonly invoked female figures is Ganika, the courtesan mentioned in Hindu mythology and prevalent in the minds of common people. In the fourth composition under Rag (musical mode) Sorath, Guru Teghbahadar (1621–1675) writes:



*O mind! Contemplate [entering] into the shelter of the One.
 Remembering Whom, the like of Ganika was liberated,
 enshrine the praises of That One in the heart.1. Pause.
 Through the remembrance of Whom,
 Dhruv became stable and found a fearless state.
 Why have you forgotten the Owner, the Remover of suffering,
 [Who is] of such a way?1.
 Just when the elephant took the shelter of the Treasure of grace,
 it escaped from the octopus.
 To what extent should I describe the glory of Nam,
 [just] while uttering Ram the bondage of that [elephant] was broken?2.
 The world knows the sinful Ajamal,
 [whose] liberation [happened] in the blink of an eye.
 Nanak states: Remember the wish-Fulfiller; you will also get across.3.4.^{ix}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 632

The Guru uses the examples of Ganika, Dhruv, the elephant, and Ajamal to illustrate the intrinsic goodness of IkOankar, the One who is capable of helping when no one else can. These examples also emphasize the grace that all seekers have access to if they seek the sanctuary of the One. The One freed Ganika, a courtesan, considered in that time and in that culture, as well as today, to have one of the worst possible occupations, demeaned and considered dirty and unworthy of grace. The Guru is not making a statement on the occupation that Ganika has but rather on the fact that she was deemed unworthy of grace due to her occupation. The Guru shows us that even those considered by society to be the lowest or most “impure” have access to grace and freedom.

Ganika has been referenced again alongside Draupadi, the female protagonist of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, in Guru Teghbahadar’s first composition under Rag Maru:

*The 1-Light’s Nam is always comforting,
 Remembering which, Ajamal was liberated; Ganika also attained liberation.1. Pause.
 Awareness of 1-Charmer’s Nam came to the princess of Panchal in the royal court.
 The compassionate One removed her sorrow and increased Own honor.1.
 The men who sang the praises of the Treasure of grace,
 [that One] became helpful to them.
 Nanak’s statement: On this very belief, having come, I have taken the Sanctuary.2.1.^x*

— Guru Granth Sahib 1008



The Guru invokes Ajamal and Ganika again, emphasizing that the remedy to their pain was Nam, or Identification with IkOankar, the 1-Light. Ajamal, the fallen, and Ganika, the fallen, became free when Identification with the 1-Light carried them across this world.

The Guru continues with another example, this time the princess of Panchal, Draupadi. In Hindu mythology, Draupadi was married to the Pandavs – five brothers from one of the larger dynasties. The Pandavs lost her in a bet to the Kauravs (one hundred brothers descended from a King). The scene the Guru describes is what happened after the Kauravs lost the bet – Draupadi was in the royal court, and the Kauravs were dishonoring her in front of her husbands and relatives, pulling at her sari to unravel it. At this moment, as she understood that her husbands and their networks were doing nothing for her, Draupadi felt an awareness of the greatest support: Identification with the beautiful One, IkOankar. The story states that the One caused her sari to become longer and longer so that it could never be fully unraveled. The Guru says that the compassionate One removed her sorrow, protected her, and cared for her pain. Not only was her honor protected, but it was increased and expanded. It is not just that Identifying with the 1-Light, IkOankar, caught or saved her; it is that she rose to new heights and was newly empowered by this Identification.

These invocations of Ganika and Draupadi are important responses to the tendencies people have to deem women “good” or “bad” and somehow inherently lustful or far from divinity. Both of these figures were protected by IkOankar and empowered despite the way they were treated in society by powerful men and other women.

Shifting from the mythological examples of Ganika and Draupadi, there is also a historical reference in Bani to one woman in particular: Mata Khivi, the wife of Guru Angad (1504-1552). In the composition of Ramkali Ki Var, bards Satta Dum and Rai Balvand write:

Who has earned [the service], that [one becomes] acceptable;
 [only] some great [being can judge between] thistle and paddy.
 Dharamraj is the deity [who] administers justice, having listened to the talks.
 [Whatever] the true Guru utters, the True One does; that thing happens instantly.
 The glory of Guru Angad spread; [this Guruship] is eternal, having fixed,
 the Creator has established it.
 Nanak, the one having hundreds of branches,
 having changed the body and occupied the throne, is sitting [on it].
 Standing, the populace serves the door,
 [just like] rusty [metal] becomes [clean] with a scraper.
 [Who] has [become] a dervish at the door of the master [Guru],
 through the true Nam, radiance has appeared [on their face].
 Balvand signature: Mata Khivi is a virtuous being,
 the shade of whom [has] many leaves.
 Wealth is distributed in the langar, amrit-essence, and kheer [enriched] with ghee.
 The faces of the Guru's Sikhs are radiant with light;
 self-centered [beings] have become [pale like] paddy straw.
 [Lahina] became accepted by [his] master when [he] performed manly deed.
 The husband of Mata Khivi is that who has uplifted the universe.^{3.xi}

— Guru Granth Sahib 967

Ramkali Ki Var is a historical account of the Guruship from Guru Nanak onwards, both serving to document and affirm the passing of Guruship and the authority of the Guru. It is within this documentation that Satta and Balvand mention the importance of Mata Khivi in the trajectory of this history. Guru Nanak is described as having hundreds of branches, a person with so many devotees who are so devoted they have become like his own limbs. This visual is one of motherly nurturing and care. Three lines after this reference, Balvand refers to Mata Khivi as a virtuous being whose shade is very leafy or dense. The use of the word “being” to refer to Mata Khivi rather than “woman” is important. She is not classified as a virtuous woman due to some kind of societal expectation about obeying her husband, taking care of the household, or acting as an extension of her husband’s property. She is a virtuous being (who happens to be a woman) because “her patronage is extremely comfortable for disciples.” She, too, is compared to a tree that provides cooling to the seekers through her leadership and care. Her contribution to the growing community of devotees of the Guru is langar (community kitchen), in which wealth is distributed along with Amrit (Immortal Nectar), khir (rice and milk pudding), and ghee (clarified butter). Mata Khivi is associated with this understanding of seva (service) and langar (free community kitchen serving all individuals), which differs from prevailing understandings. Langars in the Indic context were very male-driven and often female-exclusionary spaces due to the belief that women are impure when menstruating. Yogis eat very little as a form of renunciation and do not enjoy the food they consume as a way to practice discipline. Among existing social practices to only affiliate with people from particular backgrounds, langars were also a public site for remaking caste exclusion through food and social association. In the langar of Mata Khivi, the food that is distributed is not whatever meets the bare necessity of nutrition – it is rich food with flavor and nourishment, meant to be

enjoyed by the community of devotees. This langar is born out of the service at the door of Guru Angad's throne, channeled through Mata Khivi to the people. She provides shade and service-oriented meals rich in content, offering, and flavor.

The word "manly" refers to the idea of the perfect man or perfect human who has cultivated all the divine virtues within. The "manly deed" in this context is Bhai Lahina's service, devotion, and acceptance of the command of Guru Nanak. It is a humility of self and a willingness to understand the value of submission to Guru Nanak that is deemed "manly." Guru Nanak is the mentor, and Bhai Lahina is the protege, the devotee who serves the Guru and becomes virtuous through his deeds. These deeds refine or chisel him into becoming "Angad," a name that denotes being "of the Guru's own body."

Finally, the last line of this utterance is noteworthy: The Husband of Khivi is that who has uplifted the universe. The central importance of Mata Khivi is again emphasized in this line, as Guru Angad is referred to not by his name but by his association with Mata Khivi. Even in current times, women are referred to by their family's and husbands' names and occupations, as if their identities are nothing more than who they are in relation to the men around them. That tendency is flipped here, as Satta and Balvand end by centering Mata Khivi once again. She is not a side character or a person whose importance is due to mere association with the Guru. She is an important figure on her own; association with her, and her seva is noteworthy, and her role in furthering the mission of the Guru cannot be overstated.

What vocabulary is invoked to refer to women in Bani?

There are multiple words used to refer to women in Bani, some with neutral connotations, others with positive or negative connotations. In their original contexts or uses in larger Indic culture, they may mean one thing, but these words become synonymous with the seeker in relation to the Spouse, IkOankar, when invoked in Bani. There are times when these words for women are invoked to comment on society and gendered oppression, as evident in the earlier excerpts. Most often, the original meanings of many of these words are disrupted to convey something deeper regarding the relationship between lover and Beloved. Every interpretation of these terms refers to the seeker, regardless of gender identity. These words become about the self and what individuals ought to do in their relationships with the One:

Gurmukhi	Transcription	Meaning
ਅਉਰਤ	aūrat	woman
ਬਹੁਰੀਆ	bahurīā	bride, daughter-in-law
ਬਾਲੀ	bālī	youthful bride, innocent young bride
ਦਾਰਾ	dārā	wife
ਧਨ / ਸਾ ਧਨ	dhan / sā dhan	bride

ਧਨੀਆ	dhanīā	wealth-longing woman
ਦੋਹਾਗਣਿ	dohāgaṇi	deserted bride, seprated bride, unfortunate bride
ਇਸਤਰੀ	istarī	woman
ਜੋਬਨਿ	jobani	youth (any gender)
ਕਾਮਣਿ	kāman/kāmaṇi	bride, unvirtuous bride, ungenuine bride
ਕੰਨਿਆ	kanniā	unmarried girl
ਕੁਲਵੰਤੀ	kulvantī	woman of noble lineage or high-caste
ਮੋਹਨੀ	mohnī	beautiful enticing woman
ਮੁੰਧੇ	mundhe	woman, ignorant woman
ਨਾਰ / ਨਾਰੀ	nār / nārī	woman
ਰੰਡ	rand	widow
ਸੋਭਾਵੰਤੀ	sobhāvantī	praise-worthy woman
ਸੋਹਾਗਣਿ	sohāgaṇi	bride who enjoys love of husband, fortunate bride
ਸੂਹਵੀਏ	sūhavīe	red-robed bride, beautiful love-drenched bride
ਸੂਹਬ	sūhab	red-robed bride, beautiful love-drenched bride

All of these words are invoked to refer to the human-bride, or the seeker (the self in relation to IkOankar as the Divine Husband). This list is by no means exhaustive. Depending on the context, these words can have negative or positive connotations (and it is also important to acknowledge that there may be caste correlations with some words).

“Kaman” or “kamani” is often used to refer to a seeker without virtues or who has not worked to inculcate the virtues of the One in their relationship with the One. “Bali” is often used to refer to the seeker who does not know the way because of a lack of experience in that relationship with the One. “Mundhe” is often used to refer to the unrealized intellect, the seeker who is engrossed in the temporary. “Suhavie” and “suhab” are often used to refer to the seeker who is drenched in the love of the One and immersed in their relationship with IkOankar. This understanding that all seekers are feminine beings is elaborated on in the Guru Granth Sahib:

*In this world, there is one man-Being, all others are all women-beings.
 [That One] enjoys all bodies, remains unattached; incomprehensive,
 cannot be comprehended.
 [Whosoever], the perfect Guru-Wisdom shows [the One],
 grasps the insights from the Sabad-Word.
 Those who serve-remember the Being become like the Being,
 for they burn-kill their ego with Sabad-Word.
 No one equals to That [One], no one has army-strength to be [the One's] enemy.
 That [One's] Raj-Rule is forever immovable, neither comes-starts nor goes-ends.
 The servant-seeker serves [the One] everyday, sings the greatness of eternal Hari.
 Nanak blossoms-elates seeing-witnessing the greatness of the eternal Hari.^{xvi}*

– Guru Granth Sahib 591



All the beings in this world are both feminine and masculine. However, Bani can take us out of our human and worldly conditions and move us into something vaster. For the seeker, these worldly gender identities are irrelevant. All human beings, then, are women-beings, in relationship with the Man-Being (IkOankar) who is enjoying all beings of all gender identities. There is playfulness and sensuality here in reference to the relationship between the lovers and the Beloved and the play of creation. Many miss these nuances and conclude that Sikh theology and thealogy are patriarchal rather than understanding that practices are influenced by Panjabi, Indian, South Asian, and global cultures.

When and how is the feminine voice used in Bani?

The feminine voice is used in Bani to express longing and separation on the seeker's part. The Gurus identify with the feminine voice to deliver compositions that are brave and vulnerable, loving and full of yearning. The feminine voice is able to convey these emotions and intimacies and frame the relationship between lover and Beloved as that of the human-bride and the Divine-Husband. Professor Puran Singh elaborates:

The whole Guru Grantha [Sikh scripture] is the voice of a wedded woman or a maiden pining in love of the Beautiful. Her nobleness in Guru Grantha is infinite, her freedom is of the highest. Both man and woman as sexes are forgotten in her voice. She becomes the supreme reality and a freed soul. In the freed soul alone in the subordination of one to the other effectively abolished and all disputes hushed.³

- Prof. Puran Singh, *Spirit Born People*

In Guru Nanak's Kuchaji, the Guru sets the composition in the context of specific terms commonly used to refer to a bride who does not know the way or have the proper skills (kuchaji), and the bride who has lost connection with her Spouse (duhagani). Guru Nanak uses those terms in the broader context of the union between the human seeker (bride) and the Divine (the Spouse, IkOankar, the 1Force). Guru Nanak identifies with Kuchaji, the ungraceful bride who does not know the way:

*I am kuchaji, [I have] plentiful faults;
 how do I go for enjoying [union with] the Divine-Husband jiu?
 [There] are [fortunate human-brides, each] one better than the other;
 who [even] knows my name jiu?
 Those female friends who have enjoyed [union with] the Divine-Husband,
 [it is as if] they are sitting under the shade of the mango trees jiu.
 (But) I know not (how) to acquire those virtues [of those female friends];
 on which being do I lay blames jiu?
 [O Divine-Husband!] Which of Your virtues do I describe?
 Which of Your name(s) should I invoke jiu?
 I cannot reach [You] through any material object;
 I devote [myself] to You forever jiu.
 Gold, silver is lovely; pearl and ruby [are also lovely] jiu.
 Those [material] objects that the Divine-Husband has given,
 I have attached my mind to them jiu.
 Houses of clay and stone, I have made my capital jiu.
 [Engaged] in these material objects, I have forgotten That IkOankar,
 [have] not sat near that Divine-Husband jiu.
 The demoiselle cranes have cried in the sky;
 the herons, having come, have sat jiu.
 Human-bride has set out for the in-law's [house];
 [but] what face will she show hereafter, having reached [there] jiu?
 [While] sleeping and sleeping, dawn has broken;
 [the kuchaji] has forgotten the way jiu.
 [She] has separated from You, the Divine-Husband;
 [she] has suffered from pains jiu.
 [O Beloved!] In You are [all] virtues, in me are all flaws;
 [this is my,] Nanak's, one prayer jiu!
 [You have given] all the nights to the suhagans;
 [give] to me, the duhagan, a night [as well] jiu.1.xvii*

— Guru Granth Sahib 762



The "kuchaji" is the seeker who reflects on their own faults and how those faults affect the seeker's relationship with the Divine-Husband (IkOankar). Due to their self-realized shortcomings, the "kuchaji" feels unworthy and not pleasing to the Divine, despite seeking to be. The Guru uses this feminine voice, and this term is used for newly married women to communicate a relationship with the Divine in which one is able to hunger for connection lovingly and ask for the grace of even a momentary union.

The feminine voice and the reframing of “kuchaji” show all seekers how to realize their shortcomings and seek grace from IkOankar.

One might wonder why there are no women contributors to the Guru Granth Sahib. The answer to this question is not known. What is known unquestionably is that Bani’s voice is feminine, the great relationships to explore love are via mother and feminine-friends, and the protagonist is a bride experiencing the pangs of separation.

Dr. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, in *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Transcendent*, explores:

The very fact that the male Gurus identify with the female affirms a human situation. The ardor of their longing for the Infinite Reality is expressed in her voice. Male authors and poets in the Guru Granth do not confront the female, but seek to merge themselves with feminine feelings and thoughts. The male-female duality, which violates the wholeness of human nature and deprives each person of the other half is overcome, establishing, in turn, the significance of being human. Men and women are united and share their human angst and human hope.⁴

What does Bani say about the masculine?

Although there are multiple references to the play of gender within Bani, there are also references to manliness, which can be interpreted as masculinity. These understandings of masculinity or manliness are what people use to define a “man” in Western countries. Though there are some similarities around manliness between Western cultures and Sikh history and theology, Sikh history and theology provide many points of divergence. Masculinity is simply another way for a person to embody some aspect of who they are. The Guru associates many qualities with “being a man” that are typically considered non-hypermasculine in other cultures. Due to the pervasiveness of the Guru and Sikh identity as only being associated with particular types of masculinity or hyper-masculinity in Sikh sangats across the diaspora, these excerpts that invoke manliness are worth exploring.

*The one who is graced with the grace of the Graceful One, That one is the man,
the man, the man-like.
That one is the Sheikh, Mashaikh, and Haji;
that one is the Banda on whom the Divine glances.^{xv}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 1083



***Note:** In Arab or Muslim traditions, Sheikh is a guide or chief. Mashaikh is a scholar, clergy, and leader. Haji is a pilgrim to Mecca. Banda is a slave of Allah.

Societal and traditional ideas of what is macho, masculine, manly, or virile are being disrupted by the Guru; the Guru offers different understandings of how to exist in this material world and uses gender as one tool to help make this point. Gender identity is not the focus here, but instead the reframing of what it means to be the “(hu)man of all (hu)men,” something similar to the Islamic concept of the “Perfect Man,” or the one who has inculcated all of the divine virtues and thus become divine-like. This reference can be understood in the larger context of Islamic terminology throughout this excerpt. The “manliest” or most “masculine” one is the one on whom grace is bestowed by the compassionate One. Bravery comes not from physical feats but from overcoming vices and becoming a devotee of the One. This word “mard” is used in reference to Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) as well in writings by Bhai Gurdas Singh, whose composition is dated around 1787.⁵

That man is revealed as *the* unreachable one, the only warrior.
[Guru] Gobind Singh is a wonder, wonder! Own-Self is the Guru and the disciple.⁶

Again, the word “mard” is used for a masculine man but is reframed through the description of Guru Gobind Singh as the one who has inculcated the virtues and become divine-like, rather than the one who solely has physical strength. Hence, the Guru is the only warrior.

When and how is gender invoked in Bani? What does Bani say about gender?

From the very first invocation of Mul Mantra (Root Verse), IkOankar is described as transcending gender. The word Purakh literally means Being and is interpreted as manifest or pervading. Its Sanskrit etymology is purushah, meaning man or male, and interpreted to mean lying in the city or body. When purakh implies “man” or “person,” it is a noun. When it is an adjective, it can be translated as “pervasive.” As per the etymology and root meaning, the word “purakh/purush” can be described as the One that is without form, all-pervasive, and beyond gender. Hence, the interpretation of Purakh as implying that IkOankar is “beyond gender” is interpretive. It is abundantly clear that IkOankar is formless, but in popular dominant religious narratives, IkOankar is almost always referred to as “He/Him.” This is true even in popular Sikh narratives, where (consciously or unconsciously) the masculine gender is assigned to IkOankar.

IkOankar is genderless and formless, as Guru Nanak elucidates in Rag Maru:



*[The One] is the leader of towns-bodies, is new-fresh, child-like, [without enmity],
and performs incomparable plays.
[The One] is not a [particular] woman, man, or bird;
[the One] is eternal, wise, and beautiful.
Whatever That [One] likes that is what occurs;
You are the lamp and the fragrance^{xii}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 1010

5. According to Bhai Vir Singh, the first known Bhai Gurdas (c.1558–1637) was the scholar, poet, interpreter, scribe, mediator, and theologian who was a confidant and contemporary of four Gurus, whose Varas are commonly known. The second was a contemporary of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib. The third was a Masand, who used to be with Ram Rai. The fourth Bhai Gurdas came much after Guru Gobind Singh, whose writing is often compiled with the original Bhai Gurdas' Varan as the 41st Var. This is known due to the dating of 1787 done by Bhai Vir Singh after analyzing the text which is called Ramkali Var Patshahi Dasven Ki. The cited lines are from Pauri 17.

In this excerpt, the Guru describes IkOankar as child-like, without enmity, ever-fresh, constantly new, and beyond complete understanding. The statement that the One is not a woman, man, or bird emphasizes that the One is not of a particular form, shape, or gender. This is followed by pointing to the less concrete and less tangible qualities of the One: wisdom, omniscience, and even beauty. There is a beauty to the One that cannot be categorized or known completely. The Guru refers to the One as the lamp at night and the sun during the day, pointing to IkOankar's all-pervasive and all-encompassing nature and IkOankar's role as the One who illuminates and gives wisdom to all. IkOankar is also the fragrance, one of the virtues and sweet behavior. The statement that whatever the One likes occurs emphasizes the play of IkOankar, the Creator, much like in the following reference on gender and the play of things one might think to have concrete categories and divisions. This reference to the traditional gender binary as part of the larger play of creation is made in multiple places in Bani and points to an essential unity in the "binary," as well as transcending these categories altogether:

*Female is in the male, male is in the female.
Understand this, O Divine-realized being!^{xiii}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 1010



In a worldly and biological sense, the female is in the male because the male is necessary for producing the female (sperm is needed to fertilize an egg). The male is in the female because the female is the vessel that holds and nurtures life before it is born (the fertilized egg develops in the womb). Thus, the male is born out of the female, and the female is born out of the male. This is the unnarratable narrative that there is no use in this binary or trying to "figure it out." In a trans-worldly sense, in a vaster sense, it is up to each individual to look into themselves and ask if the socially constructed and internalized binary of male and female harmonizes with their real purpose or with what purpose it does harmonize. The key is to create a union between the binaries of males and females, and the masculine and feminine within. Each individual is asked to reflect on what claiming to be only male, or only female does for their journey to and relationship with the Guru and IkOankar. If one becomes a realized individual, one does not look at themselves or anyone else as male or female, but rather all as human-brides.

The Guru is disrupting binaries we have created and absorbed internally as a society. One's relationship with oneself will ultimately decide their relationships with others. If the goal is to be divine-like, one must bring one's internal sense of male and female into harmony within (achieved by removing this binary altogether). If those socially constructed internally imbibed dichotomies and binaries die out, then the socially constructed external dichotomies can also die out.



*[The One] Own-Self is the man, [the One] Own-Self is the woman.
[The One] Own-Self is the dice, [the One] Own-Self is the game-pieces.
[The One] Own-Self created the game the world plays,
[the One] Own-Self appraises, indeed! ^{xiv}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 1020

It is important to understand that the binaries the Guru refers to are those socially constructed binaries familiar to us as the norm. The Guru refers to IkOankar as the male-spouse and all humans as the female-spouse, not as an endorsement or prescription of the worldly relationship, but as an acknowledgment of the realities of these relationships and the reality of gender as it is expressed and understood in the world. The acknowledgment of this reality is not being erased. It is clear that those who identify as women experience certain gendered expectations and have certain experiences as a result of their gender identity, just as those who identify as men experience certain gendered expectations and have certain experiences as a result of their gender identity. The Guru, while acknowledging this paradigm, is asking us to think beyond it, beyond the worldly, and into the vastness of the relationship between the seeker and the Divine.

In this transcendence of categories, all men and women are the One; the One is each element of the play. The creation is playing, and the Creator is playing. This game was created by the One, and it is played by the One. The question is whether or not this play is understood.

Tavarikh

History

Throughout Sikh history, women and gender can be understood in the context of Sikh women destroying stereotypes imposed by gender norms and expectations. These stories are rooted in oral history and give insight into women's integral role. Women and gender can also be understood in the context of the Gurus addressing the subjugation of women through their institutions and the extension of their nation-building throughout the Guru period.

What does Sikh history tell us about how women were perceived in the larger culture versus within the Panth?

The prevailing socio-political reality for women at the time of the Gurus was a reality of subjugation. Women were considered impure, untouchable, inferior, incapable, or unlikely to achieve *Moksha* (salvation). They experienced discrimination through sex selection and feticide, the practice of dowry, domestic violence, sexual abuse, objectification, forced marriage, and religious discrimination. The Guru's directives addressed these realities head-on. The Guru opposed the low status of women and sexism rooted in this belief, eradicated *pardah*, or the veiling and exclusion of women from public spaces, countered *sati*, or widow immolation, advocated for widow remarriage, ordered the boycott of those who killed their girl children, and abolished the patriarchal hegemony through the initiation ceremony of taking *Amrit* (Immortal Nectar).

Bhai Gurdas (c.1558-1637), scholar, theologian, and a contemporary of four Gurus, describes women as the "gateway to freedom":

*In people's contemplation of virtues and in the religious texts' knowledge,
half-body [woman] is the gateway to freedom.
Guru-oriented is joyous and fruitful, [she] is the trustworthy woman.⁷*

Here, Bhai Gurdas is speaking about the Sikh of the Guru as a woman. The popular understandings of this excerpt miss the context and understand it as literally referring only to women, which is very powerful given the then-era. Additionally, this is an extension of the symbolism seen in Bani, of the seeker as a girl-child who grows in the world in the parent's home to the bride who must leave for her in-laws' home to be with the Divine Husband. The voice of the seeker is feminine, the seeker is feminine, and the story is being told through their voice as the one who is Guru-oriented and joyous as they go to unite with the Spouse.

What does Sikh history tell us about how the Gurus addressed the treatment of women in the larger culture?

Gender-based violence remains a profound challenge in contemporary times across the globe. Though female subjugation is a significant cause of gendercide, it is rarely presented as an issue to be understood through a “religious” perspective. In the four compositions of Guru Nanak’s titled Babarvani, the Guru gives an eye-witness account of the genocidal campaign in the 16th century to present the plight of all South Asian women in 1521. The Guru challenges the social attitudes and beliefs that undergird religion-based men’s violence towards women.

The ruler at the time of Guru Nanak’s compositions was the Sultan of Delhi: a Pathan named Ibrahim Lodhi. Mughal emperor Zahir ud-din Muhammad Babar invaded from Central Asia, and a confrontation between these two power centers, the conquerors and the indigenous, led to a massive battle – not of religion-based violence, but two practitioners of Islam vying for power. At this time, Guru Nanak was embarking on his fourth Udasi (epical journey “to meet Perfection-oriented” ones), going from Mecca to Madina to Kabul to Saidpur, and Babar’s army was devastating the Panjab. In his popularly termed collection, Babarvani, Guru Nanak describes his eyewitness accounts of the atrocities of Babar and his men in Saidpur (now Eminabad, Panjab, Pakistan). Guru Nanak describes the massive killings in graphic language, documenting the events:

*Bringing the wedding party of sin,
[Babur] has come from Kabul and is demanding the gift by force, O Lalo!
Sense of shame and righteousness have both stood in hiding;
falsehood is roaming [around having become] the chief, O Lalo!
The talk of Qazis and Brahmins has worn off; Satan is reading the nikah, O Lalo!
Muslim women are reading Semitic texts;
in distress [they] are saying Khuda [Khuda], O Lalo!
Low caste and other Hindu women include these too in the count [of sufferings],
O Lalo!
Nanak signature: Having put the saffron of blood,
wedding songs of blood are being sung, O Lalo!¹^{xviii}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 722–23



In this context, Guru Nanak describes the crimes being perpetrated against women, and moves to frame the perpetrators as celebratory in their mood, gleeful in their crimes, as if it is the day of their wedding. He extends this metaphor throughout the sabad (hymn-like stanza that exemplifies Infinite Wisdom’s word-sound). He subverts the tradition of using saffron or vermillion on the bride’s head as a sign of celebration by likening the resulting blood of the violent crimes to that same celebratory red mark. The level of violation of women is discussed as Babar’s men take “gifts” by force and are described as a “wedding party of sin” due to their actions against the women they are taking advantage of.

Guru Nanak candidly elaborates on the state of Babar, and his men's genocidal campaign throughout Babarvani:

*[The Creator] has acted [compassionately] like an Owner, with Khurasan,
[but] terrorized Hindustan [instead].
The Creator does not give blame to Own-Self; the Mughal [Babar] was made to invade,
having made [him] the Messenger of death.
The beating [by the Mughal army] was so [severe that people] wailed,
“Did the suffering not reach You?”...^{xix}*

*...Having ruined jewel-like beings, dog-like Mughals have destroyed [them];
no care [was shown] to the dead.^{xx}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 360



Khurasan refers to a vast historical region in northern Iran, southern Turkmenistan, and northern Afghanistan. Hindustan here refers to the subcontinent of India south of the river Indus. He also goes into very detailed descriptions of the plight of women as tools of subjugation through violent and systemic violation:

*On whose heads the braids looked beautiful,
having put vermillion in the part [of the hair].
Those heads are being shaved with scissors; dirt is getting into their throats.
[They] used to be inside palaces; now,
[they have] not found [a place] to sit [even] in front [of those palaces]...^{xxi}*

*...[They] used to eat coconut-kernels [and] dried dates,
[they] used to enjoy the [comforts of a] bed.
[Now] ropes have been put around their necks; [their] strings of pearls are breaking...^{xxii}*

*...[Babar] ordered [his soldiers], messengers of death, [to dishonor them];
having destroyed the honor [of the beings],
[the messengers of death] are carrying [them] away.^{xxiii}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 417



*One was a Hindu woman, another was a Muslim woman;
[someone was] a Bhatti woman [and some] Rajput.
The robes of many were torn from head to toe;
the dwelling of many was in the cremation grounds.^{xxiv}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 418



It is important to note that Guru Nanak's descriptions of these events are not in any way providing a solely religious view, despite the Guru offering his perspective and providing a Sikh worldview. The Guru describes a complete lack of spirituality or humanity among the people who claim to be of certain religious persuasions and argues that inherent in these actions is evidence that there is no religiosity present. He emphasizes that no women are spared – Hindu or Muslim, high caste or low. Guru Nanak feels the pain of both Hindustani and Turkani women, or Muslim women of Turkish descent – further emphasizing that this is not an issue of only one particular religion or practice or persuasion (this is not to say that the Guru does not, in other utterances, acknowledge the poor treatment of women by religious men of Abrahamic and Indic religions). The Guru does not conclude the nature of the Divine or the "Problem of Evil" from his descriptions or make existential excuses for the actions of these men. Instead, he paints a vivid picture of the horrific acts he is witnessing. Even documentation is revolutionary; no one else at the time raised their voice. Whereas in many cases, female subjugation is explained away as the result of certain religious practices, religion is not usually involved as a possible lens through which to understand the issue better.

The Guru discusses why this gendercide is happening in the context of his time in descriptions of the Mughals and the Lodhis:

*The princely Pathan rulers had lost their senses while indulging in sensual pleasures.
[Now that] the word of Babur has prevailed,
[even] the [Pathan] prince cannot eat bread.^{xxv}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 417



*Millions of pirs failed to stop [the invasion] when [they] heard the king [Babar] advancing.
Places, dwellings, and well-built houses were burnt; the princes,
having been cut into pieces, were rolled [in the dust].
No Mughal became blind; no slip of paper [with a magic spell worked].*

*[When] the battle of the Mughals and Pathans took place,
[they] wielded swords on the battlefield. They fired guns, having drawn [them] out,
they provoked the elephants [into a frenzy].^{xxvi}*

— Guru Granth Sahib 418



When discussing violations against women, a common perspective often frames the issue as rooted in religion or a lack thereof. Guru Nanak is clear in the framework he provides that the issue is not religious, as there are two kingdoms led by men who both proclaim to be followers of Islam fighting one another, but that the problem is actually rooted in the dynamics of men in power and their politics. Of course, religion can be used to justify the poor treatment of women, but in this case, there is no doctrinal basis for people committing these acts. He contextualizes the Lodhis as intoxicated with their own sense of themselves and merrymaking and points to that as the catalyst for an outside power center taking advantage of their dynasty. He is making a statement about political corruption and the vulnerabilities it creates in entire societies, leaving the common people to suffer. And in situations where the dynamics of power and politics are at play – both in 1521 and today – women are almost always the pawns or the collateral damage, used as tools in the games of men.

Understanding how women at large are used and viewed by society is important in looking at the way the Gurus disrupt those pervading norms and views around gender and womanhood. And these disruptions influenced Sikhs through history as well, as historian Hari Ram Gupta points out:

In all contemporary records, mostly in Persian, written generally by Muslims as well as by Maratha agents posted at a number of places in Northern India, there is not a single instance either in Delhi or elsewhere in which the Sikhs raised a finger against women.⁸

Those disruptions can also be seen taking place in women's lives throughout Sikh history, which can help us understand the development of the larger identity of women in the Panth. Who are the strong women in Sikh history? How is Bani coming through them? How are they developing and engaging in an equal partnership and in some cases, clear leadership in Sikh spaces?

Which women from the Guru's family took on public leadership roles in the Panth in the Guru period?

Gender-based violence remains a profound challenge in contemporary times across the globe. Though female subjugation is a significant cause of gendercide, it is rarely presented as an issue to be understood through a "religious" perspective. In the four compositions of Guru Nanak's titled Babarvani, the Guru gives an eye-witness account of the genocidal campaign in the 16th century to present the plight of all South Asian women in 1521. The Guru challenges the social attitudes and beliefs that undergird religion-based men's violence towards women.

Bebe Nanki (c.1464-1518): First to recognize Guru Nanak

As Guru Nanak's elder sister, Bebe Nanki saw the potential in him before others did, defended his life choices, and believed in him. She perceived Guru Nanak not only as her brother but also as a divine being. Her encouragement, companionship, and protection allowed him to be revealed to the world as the Guru. He stayed with Bebe Nanki and her husband for several months in Sultanpur Lodhi, where Guru Nanak's divinity was revealed to the world. She gave him money to buy his first rabab to sing Sabads and spread his message. When he embarked on his Udasis (journeys) with Bhai Mardana, she cared for his family in his absence. Bebe Nanki was the first devotee of the Guru. It is due to her care, encouragement, and support that Guru Nanak was able to spread the fragrance of Sikhi.⁹

Mata Khivi (c.1506-1586): Established the tradition of langar (community kitchen)

Mata Khivi was the first Sikh who emerged from the traditional confinement of the South Asian household and liberated the women leading these households to participate in the langar initiated by Guru Nanak freely. As explored in the Bani section, she is the only woman from the Guru period whose name is mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib.

When Bhai Lahina became Guru Angad and established the city of Khadur, Mata Khivi established the tradition of langar. As Ramkali Ki Var details, the langar of Mata Khivi was nourishing and offered service through the inspiration of Amrit (Immortal Elixir). Even the act of organizing and furthering the tradition of langar – typically an institution in which women were not allowed – was revolutionary. Mata Khivi was a noble woman who shattered norms and gave soothing leafy shade to all. She was a nourishing presence, and a community formed around her influence and hospitality.¹⁰

Mata Mansa Devi (died c.1569): Developed Goindval

Mata Mansa Devi was the wife of the third Guru, Guru Amardas. When Guru Amardas became Guru, he led the construction of Goindval Nagar on the banks of the river Beas. Both the Guru and Mata Mansa Devi made great contributions toward the development of Goindval. She also helped the Guru in building the Baoli (well). Under her leadership, many other women also contributed their labor in developing Goindval Nagar, and the tradition of langar was continued.¹¹

Mata Mansi Devi also advocated for other women, drawing attention to the plight of widows in society and addressing the veiling of women in public spaces. Due to this advocacy, Guru Amardas encouraged women not to veil in the darbar (royal court). Guru Amardas appointed two women as heads of the Manjis (centers for the propagation of Sikhi). The Guru also appointed women to 52 out of the 146 sub-seats as leaders of Pisis (centers used to spread the fragrance of Sikhi).¹²

Bibi Bhani (c.1535-1598): Multi-generational leader

Bibi Bhani had the same values as her mother, Mata Mansa Devi, serving Guru Amardas selflessly as his devotee rather than as his daughter. She was the wife of Guru Ramdas, and when she became the mother of Guru Arjan, she extended her guidance to him. She spent time in Goindval, serving in the construction of the Baoli. After marriage, she and her husband, Bhai Jetha (later Guru Ramdas), remained in Goindval to serve the Guru until Bhai Jetha was instructed by the Guru to establish a town in present-day Amritsar. Bibi Bhani was a multi-generational leader and guide, as the daughter of Guru Amardas, wife of Guru Ramdas, mother of Guru Arjan, and the grandmother of Guru Harigobind.

Mata Damodari (c.1597-1631): Leadership during political chaos

Mata Damodari was the wife of Guru Harigobind, grandmother of Guru Harirai, and great-grandmother of Guru Harikrishan. She was the daughter-in-law of Guru Arjan.

Only a short time after Mata Damodari's marriage, Mughal Emperor Jahangir sent for her father-in-law, Guru Arjan, to Lahore and announced that he might never return from there. The Guruship was then assigned to her husband, Guru Harigobind, and at 10 years old, Damodari became Mata Damodari for the whole Sikh congregation. The devotion, love, commitment, and wisdom with which she performed this responsibility was awe-inspiring and praised far and wide.¹³

Mata Gujri (c.1624-1705): Continued martyrdom tradition

Mata Gujri was an illuminating force behind her husband Guru Teghbahadar (the ninth Guru) and her son Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Guru). She contributed to the efforts of Guru Teghbahadar before he was Guru. After the Guru's martyrdom, Mata Gujri helped lead and advise the Sikhs and guided her son, Guru Gobind Singh. She was responsible for the training of the Sahibzadas (the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh), who gave up their lives for Sikhi while they were still very young. When she and her two youngest grandsons were captured and handed over to Wazir Khan, they were imprisoned in a minaret and pressured into converting to Islam. Mata Gujri began to prepare her grandsons for their martyrdom. She taught them that they could become martyrs but never forsake their Sikhi. Mata Gujri was an inspiring force during one of the most difficult times in Sikh history.¹⁴

Mata Natti (d.1664): Head of the household

Mata Natti was the wife of Baba Gurditta (1613–1638), the eldest son of Guru Hargobind (1595–1644). She had two sons, Dhir Mall and (Guru) Harirai. After the death of Guru Harigobind and the departure of Mata Nanaki for Bakala in 1644, Mata Natti was the head of the Guru's household during the times of Guru Harirai and Guru Harikrishan.¹⁵

Mata Sahib Kaur (c.1681–1747): Mother of the Khalsa

Mata Sahib Kaur was married to Guru Gobind Singh at her father's request, and because the marriage was purely ceremonial, Guru Gobind Singh proclaimed her to be the mother of the Khalsa. Shortly before Guru Gobind Singh was martyred, Mata Sahib Kaur went to Delhi and stayed with Mata Sundari, Guru Gobind Singh's first wife. She and Mata Sundari jointly supervised the affairs of the community, as is evident from some of the hukamnamas (royal orders) issued to sangats in her name.¹⁶ Mata Sundari was the first woman kirtani (singer of Sikh musical Divine Praise), who was taught by Guru Gobind Singh. She continued singing kirtan for 80 years until she left the earthly realm.¹⁷

Often, when stories of the women from the Guru's family are told, they are framed only as secondary characters in the larger history of the Guru period. They are seen only as women fulfilling the traditional roles of sister, mother, grandmother, or wife. It is important to reiterate that these women were some of the first devotees of the Guru and engaged in selfless service just as other devotees did, dedicating themselves to the Guru and the Guru's mission. Not only did they serve the Guru, but they also furthered the Panth's development through the establishment of the tradition of langar, the literal labor of building cities and wells for the community, their empowerment of women around them, their advocacy for women in a society that oppressed and policed women, and their steadfast leadership in the Panth at times of great turmoil and uncertainty. As stated in the Bani section, women are the nucleus of the communities they are a part of. They are the center of relationships and activity; nothing is possible without them. This is clear in a brief historical survey of the women in the Guru's family and their lives and works in the Guru period.

Which women took on public leadership roles in the Panth in the Guru and post-Guru periods?

Similarly, when stories are told of other women who took on public leadership roles in both the Guru and post-Guru periods, they are framed only as secondary characters in the history of these periods. It is important to reiterate that these women were active agents in history with their own meaningful lives and decisions. They acted in great devotion to the Guru and engaged in selfless service, dedicating themselves to the Guru and the Panth's development through their battleship participation, steadfast leadership in times of turmoil and uncertainty, and bravery.

Mai Bhago (c.1666-1720): Bodyguard of Guru Gobind Singh

Mai Bhago is believed to have lived through the time of several Gurus. She was the sole survivor and the hero of the battle of Khidrana (Muktsar) on 29 December 1705. A steadfast Sikh, she was distressed to learn about Sikhs of her neighborhood deserting Guru Gobind Singh during the long siege of Anandpur by the army of hill kings and the Mughals. She persuaded the deserters to apologize to the Guru and rally behind him. She led the group back to the Guru and ambushed the imperial Mughal army near the pool of Khidrana, who were pursuing the Guru. All those in battle died, barring Mai Bhago. The 40 Sikhs who came back to the Guru are remembered daily in the collective prayer of the community. Mai Bhago was later inducted into the Khalsa army as Guru Gobind Singh's bodyguard, in which capacity she served the Guru until he left the earthly realm. Mai Bhago displayed great bravery and leadership when those around her were acting out of fear. She reminded the 40 Sikhs of their commitment to the Guru and empowered them to return to fight. After the Guru left the earthly realm, Mai Bhago left Nanded and settled in Karnataka, where she spread the fragrance of Sikhi. After her death, her home was maintained as a sacred site which later became Gurduara Tap Asthan Mai Bhago.¹⁸

Sada Kaur (c.1762-1832): Established Kingdom of Panjab

Sada Kaur was a formidable Sikh leader of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. She served as the Chief of the Kanhaiya Misl from 1789 to 1821, following the death of her husband Gurbaksh Singh Kanhaiya. An intelligent and ambitious woman, Sada Kaur was instrumental in guiding a young Ranjit Singh to found the Sikh Empire. She also played an important role in the rise and consolidation of the Sikh power in the Panjab. She was well-versed in the affairs of the state and commanded her soldiers on the battlefield. After his father's death in 1792, Ranjit Singh was made the chief of the Sukerchakia Misl, and Sada Kaur became his regent. She strategized and helped Ranjit Singh rise to power. They captured Lahore with 25,000 troops, and Sada Kaur made Ranjit Singh the Maharaja of Lahore in 1801. It was due to Sada Kaur's leadership, strategy, and encouragement that the Khalsa Kingdom was established.¹⁹

Bibi Sahib Kaur (c.1771-1801): Princess, Prime Minister, Warrior

Bibi Sahib Kaur was a warrior and leader who played a prominent part in the history of the cis-Sutlej states from 1793 to 1801. She was a Sikh princess and sister of Raja Sahib Singh Sidhu of Patiala. She was appointed prime minister in 1793. She led the troops of Patiala against the Maratha incursion in 1794, headed by Anta Rao and Lachman Rao. With help from the states of Jind, Kalsia, Thanesar, and Tara Singh Ghaiba, she successfully defeated the Maratha army and forced them to retreat towards Karnal. In another campaign, an English adventurer, George Thomas, who ruled in the neighborhood of Hansi and Hissar, had moved towards Jind. Helped by other Sikh chiefs, Sahib Kaur relieved the besieged town and forced George Thomas to withdraw (1799). Sahib Kaur disrupted social norms around what women were allowed to do or were thought capable of doing. It was in part her leadership in battle and in government that allowed for the continued existence of the cis-Sutlej states.²⁰

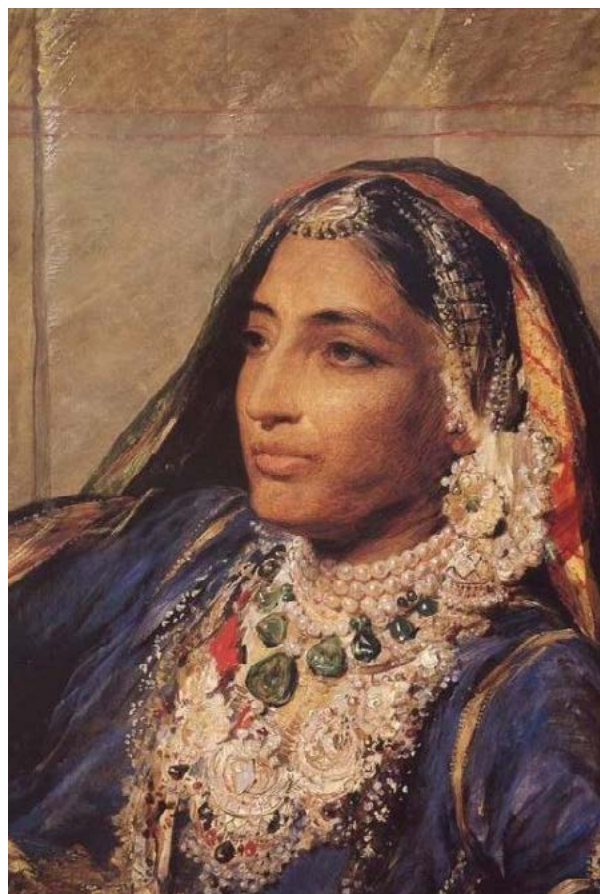
General Khem Kaur (c.1804): Revolted against British

Maharani Khem Kaur Dhillon was a Sikh queen and the second wife of Maharaja Kharak Singh, the second Maharaja of the Sikh Empire. Kharak Singh was the oldest son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the founder of the Sikh Empire, and his queen, Maharani Datar Kaur. General Khem Kaur aided the Khalsa Army in the rebellion in 1848. Due to her role in the Second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849 (a revolt against the British), the British punished her by seizing a substantial amount of her land and declared her an enemy of the state.²¹

Maharani Jind Kaur (c.1817-1863):

First Lady of Lahore Darbar

Popularly known as Rani Jinda, Maharani Jind Kaur was the wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the mother of Maharaja Duleep Singh. After Ranjit Singh's death, she assumed the role of a regent until Duleep Singh came of age, becoming the symbol of Khalsa sovereignty in Panjab. She reviewed the troops and addressed them, held court, and transacted in public State business. She reconstituted the supreme Khalsa Council by giving representation to the principal sardars and restored a working balance between the army panchayats (regimental committees) and the civil administration. Through her diplomatic skills, she averted multiple schemes to undermine her authority internally by the British. She held the empire together for a while until she surrendered political power to the council of ministers appointed by the British Resident after the treaty of Bharoval in December 1846.²²



Maharani Jind Kaur
Image courtesy: Wikimedia commons

Bibi Harnam Kaur (c.1882-1906):

Champion of girl's education

Bibi Harnam Kaur was a champion of girl child's education in the early 20th century. Born as Jiuni, she was named Harnam Kaur after her initiation into the Khalsa in 1901. She was the wife of Bhai Takht Singh, who ran a Gurmukhi school at Firozpur under the direction of the local Singh Sabha. In 1892 the couple opened a girls' school in Firozpur. Bibi Harnam Kaur later also taught in that school as an employee of the Singh Sabha. In early 1903, she opened a boarding school for girls along with Bhai Takht Singh at Firozpur, which became an important educational institution for girls. This school is still in operation today. Bibi Harnam Kaur's dedication to education for girls was revolutionary, empowering them through her schools and institutions to be independent.²³



Gulab Kaur
Image courtesy: Wikimedia commons

Gulab Kaur (c.1890-1941): Freedom fighter

Gulab Kaur joined the Ghadar Party, an organization founded by Indian immigrants to liberate India from British Rule. She led the party in the Philippines. Posing as a journalist, she distributed arms to the Ghadar Party members and recruited for the Party by distributing independence literature and delivering inspiring speeches to Indian ship passengers.²⁴ Gulab Kaur and other members of the Ghadar Party sailed to India, where she and other revolutionaries were active in the villages of Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur, and Jalandhar to mobilize the masses for armed revolution for the cause of Indian independence.²⁵ She was sentenced to two years in prison in Lahore for seditious acts. Gulab Kaur still serves as an inspiration due to her bravery, leadership, and strength. She entered the men-dominated sphere that was the freedom struggle, left her husband to fight for the country's independence, and mobilized others to fight for freedom as well.²⁶

Bibi Balbir Kaur (c.1901-1924): Martyr with faith and conviction

A respected Sikh martyr of the Jaito Morcha (1924 agitation by the Akalis), Bibi Balbir Kaur is remembered for her fearless activism and her fervor to serve the Panth. The ruler of Nabha state, Ripudaman Singh, was an ardent supporter of the Sikh movement to liberate Gurduaras from their corrupt occupants, who were under British patronage. This deeply troubled the British. They forced his abdication, in protest of which the Sikhs organized a meeting and an Akhand Path (complete recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib without a break) at Jaito, which was interrupted by the British. Subsequently, the Akalis started an agitation and sent a daily group of marchers from Amritsar to Jaito. Bibi Balbir Kaur joined one of these groups along with her infant. She resisted multiple attempts of dissuasion by other Sikhs. She was finally martyred along with her child; both sustained bullet injuries fired by British troops. Bibi Balbir Kaur's bravery has been recorded in Adarshak Singhania by Karam Singh, wherein her demeanor and steadfast dedication to the agitation even as bullets began to fly is described as something divine-like and awe-inspiring.²⁷

The women mentioned above took on public leadership roles in both the Guru and post-Guru periods and were active agents in history with their own meaningful lives and decisions. They acted in great devotion to the Guru and engaged in selfless service. They dedicated themselves to the Guru and the Panth's development. Bani tells us that women are the nucleus of society in both the private and public spheres. In a worldly sense, women in Bani are given more importance than they have been given in the prevalent culture and framings of the time. Women in Bani are not framed as mere property or extensions of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Instead, every code, every social system, every relationship, and every system of governance is rooted in women because, as we have seen, the great rulers of our history come from women, learn from women, are defended by women, and are women.

How have Sikh women in the recent past taken on leadership roles and challenged notions of what women can and cannot do?

In the recent past, there have been Sikh women at the forefront of academic and militant spaces, which gives insight into the complexities of these discussions about women and gendered roles today. These complexities are still present among near contemporaries and figures from the recent past, and these discussions are still happening. Thus, this section functions less as a historical survey and more to provide a few examples that point to larger conversations.

Former Vice-Chancellor of Punjabi University, Professor Inderjit Kaur Sandhu (c. 1923-2022), was North India's first woman Vice-Chancellor. She was also the only woman to hold a regular charge of the university since its establishment. Professor Sandhu formed Mata Sahib Kaur Dal during the Partition when people were migrating from Pakistan and worked through that organization to rehabilitate over 400 families in Patiala.²⁸ Professor Sandhu challenged notions of what women can and cannot do by being a trailblazer in her field and by empowering families through her advocacy work.



Prof. Inderjit Kaur Sandhu
Image courtesy: Punjab News Express



Rajinder Kaur

Image courtesy: Photo Archive Twitter, Harinder Singh

Journalist Rajinder Kaur (c. 1931-1989) was the daughter of Master Tara Singh, a Sikh religious and political figure who was instrumental in organizing the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee and served as a leader in the Shiromani Akali Dal party. Rajinder Kaur was a lecturer at Khalsa College, Amritsar, in 1958-59, and later entered journalism and politics. She edited the Punjabi daily *Parbhat* and the monthly *Sant Sipahi* from Amritsar. She was president of the *Istri Akali Dal*, the women's wing of the Shiromani Akali Dal, and was active in the fields of social welfare and education. She was a member of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee from 1975 onwards and was a co-founder and member of the Sikh Education Society (Panjab), which ran Khalsa colleges at Qadiari, Banga, Chandigarh, and Sathiala. She served for two years as a member of the Court of Delhi University and was a member of the National Committee on Women and the Advisory Committee of the Amritsar Municipal Corporation. In April 1978, Dr. Rajinder

Kaur was elected to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament. In 1980, she participated in a seminar for Religion and Philosophy held at Wembley Conference Centre, London, and in 1982 she attended the World Conference of Religious Workers on Disarmament in Moscow. In 1984, she led a *Shahidi Jatha* (group of martyrs) of elderly Sikh women who marched toward Sri Harimandar Sahib to demand an end to the Indian Army occupation. One hundred and twenty-five women were arrested.²⁹

Anthropologist Cynthia Mahmood discusses the Sikh women who took part in the militant movement in the 1980s and 90s in Panjab. She writes about Resham Kaur, a woman who was married to a Sikh militant. Resham Kaur and her infant son were arrested, and police tied the child to a block of ice to force Resham Kaur to give up valuable information. As Mahmood writes, “rather than succumbing to the temptation to try to spare her child, she asked for a glass of water, and when it arrived, she smashed in on the desktop and slit her throat with the ragged edge. She died on the spot.” Her husband told this story, explaining, “she was so full of love, she martyred.” Mahmood describes him as both “desperately saddened” and “fiercely proud” as he told her this story.³⁰

Mahmood interviews Amandeep Kaur, a member of the Khalistan Commando Force who displayed great fearlessness and a willingness to fight for her community. Mahmood reflects on the superficial impressions people make about what is “masculine” or feminine and how these militant women transcend those impressions:



Resham Kaur
Image courtesy: 1984tribute.com

Amandeep Kaur, the young woman whose narrative opens this chapter, appears classically feminine with her filmy veil, pink nail polish, and soft, deferent voice. Yet she was capable of killing informers in cold blood, a fact that points to the limitations of superficial impressions of masculine and feminine, especially in cultures different from one’s own. I take her story also to mean that she acted in a combat capacity as a woman, that her actions were not seen by herself or by others as in any way negating her essential femininity. Furthermore, her narration is “engaged” in the manner described by Carol Gilligan; she talks not of abstract ideals like Khalistan but in terms of individuals she knew who were hurt or killed, people who informed on her personally, considerations for her family. My point is not that there is an inherent or dramatic rift between the way this woman perceived things and the way that male militants do. I only point out that it was as a woman, not as a masculinized Sikh or a generic Sikh, that Amandeep Kaur killed³¹...There are a range of ways in which Sikh women relate to militancy, then, from shooting informers to committing suicide for husbands to desperately trying to take care of sons in a situation in which nurturance is impossible, a dilemma I heard about from several anguished mothers. Whenever discussion of gender came up, however (and my presence, as a presumed

Western feminist, prompted it fairly often), both men and women supported the notion that members of either gender were equally likely to take on a warrior role. The idea that women are somehow more naturally peaceful, which plays a role in some contemporary feminist thinking, struck nearly every Sikh I talked to as absurd.³²

The long tradition from the Guru period of challenging gender norms and structures that oppress women continued into the present day. Throughout Sikh history, one can understand women and gender in the context of Sikh women destroying stereotypes imposed by gender norms and expectations and Gurus addressing the subjugation of women through their institutions and the extension of their mission through the Guru period. But does that tradition continue today?

What do Sikh codes of conduct say about women and gender? How does the code translate into action?

In Sikh codes of conduct or Rahitname, disruptions to the hegemonic structures that oppressed and kept women down are evident.

Female Infanticide

Female infanticide was a common practice in prevalent culture during the Guru period. Although it continues today, technology allowing for early sex determination has also led to the prevalence of sex-selective abortion. Because of the prevalence of infanticide in the Guru period, the Gurus explicitly addressed the issue and condemned female infanticide. Guru Gobind Singh Sahib even directly issued a Hukamnama (royal order) against the practice (kurimar).

Kurimar ("killers of female infants"; "girl-killers" here onwards) are those guilty of killing their female babies. Female infanticide is specifically mentioned in several 18th-century Rahitname. It was in part motivated by practices like dowry and beliefs that females were of a lower caste than males. Because of the societal and economic burden of having a female child, having a male child was seen as a prosperous occasion, and having a female was deemed a disaster. This is why female babies were often discreetly killed by those delivering the babies, through methods like feeding the infant poisonous sap or suffocating the infant in the mother's blood.³³ These acts were not recorded or discussed for obvious reasons, but the methods continue to be common knowledge passed down through stories. The fact that female infanticide received such prominence in historical and legal discussions through multiple historical contexts indicates that the crime was a known practice at the time and was and still is categorically denounced.

*The one who kills female child is a murderer, is to be chastized.*³⁴

— Bhai Chaupa Singh Chibbar, Rahitname, 1723

*Those who are girl-killers and so on
Stay away and keep the mind away from them*³⁵

— Bhai Chaupa Singh Chibbar, Rahitname, 1723

In Janamsakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji di Bhai Bale vali, Guru Nanak's evaluation of the prevalent practice is recorded:

*"The revered Guru [Nanak Sahib] said: "Listen Bhai Bala! This is a major and grave murder, to take wealth of a girl-child and to kill a girl-child, but the world is committing this murder. Those who snatch and consume the material (wealth), they lose their strength (spirituality & self-respect)."*³⁶

Guru Nanak makes the point that those who commit female infanticide are doing so for utilitarian purposes and that the consequence of taking part in female infanticide is a loss of spirituality and self-respect. The Guru's words and codes of conduct in the post-Guru period emphasize an understanding of the structures that may cause people to commit kurimar and the clear consequences of committing kurimar.

Adultery

Bhai Gurdas (c.1558-1637), scholar, theologian, and a contemporary of four Gurus, addresses adultery in his writings, answering the question, "What shall a Sikh do?":

*Look at other beautiful [women] as mothers, sisters, and daughters.*³⁷

This line is situated in a heteronormative understanding of society and gender dynamics, but it can be interpreted to include anyone. One might read it as "look at other beautiful people as your kin," as a reminder that those with whom one does not have a sexual relationship ought not to be looked at sexually.

In Sikh codes of conduct, emphasis was placed on treating all women with respect, honor, and dignity. Women are not to be considered sexual objects to be used by men to take out their lust or promiscuity, violence, or vengeance. Historically, women also took on important congregational roles. For example, during Sikh Guerilla warfare, the mother of 18th-century Sikh commander Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluvalia performed kirtan (devotional singing) in the Court of the True Sovereign (collectivity of the Sikh scripture and the Sikh congregation). Girl children were also historically defended and valued through these codes. For example, Sardar Sukha Singh, commander after the Chota Ghallughara (smaller holocaust, 1746), and his wife were excommunicated due to possibly killing their daughter.³⁸

In the current Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) Sikh Rahit Maryada (Sikh code of conduct), however, women seem to be framed as an afterthought or an extension of the men with whom they have relationships (pervasive in the patriarchal culture of South Asia), and they are policed through its codes. For example, Chapter XI states:

(b) A Sikh's daughter must be married to a Sikh.

(e) When a girl becomes marriageable, physically, emotionally and by virtue of maturity of character, a suitable Sikh match should be found and she be married to him by Anand marriage rites.³⁹

The language of the SGPC-sanctioned Sikh Rahit Maryada (SRM) is a product of its time and context, 1930–40s. For that reason, English translations may not adequately communicate the meaning of the original Panjabi. That being said, there is no statement that a Sikh man ought to marry a Sikh, and the reference to a Sikh woman as “a Sikh’s daughter” continues to tie women to their fathers as owners and makes them property or extensions of their fathers – a feature of the patriarchal system and South Asian culture. In the language of the SRM’s Chapter XI, an agency of the woman is taken away, as a match is being found for her, and she is to be married. There is no language of choice in this code.

As the code gets into the actual marriage rites, there are issues of concern in the language as well.

(j) The officiant should then appraise the boy and girl of the duties and obligations of conjugal life according to the Gurus tenets. He should initially give to the two an exposition of their common mutual obligations. He should tell them how to model the husband-wife relationship on the love between the individual soul and the Supreme Soul in the light of the contents of circumambulation (lavan) hymns in the Suhi measure (rag) section of the Guru Granth Sahib.⁴⁰

Once again, it is important to remember that the language of the Sikh Rahit Maryada is a product of its time and context, and English translations may not adequately communicate the meaning of the original Panjabi. Here, the implication seems to be that the metaphor used in Bani of the human-seeker as the bride and the Divine as the Groom is to be replicated by the worldly bride and the worldly groom, where the bride is engaging in some kind of worship of her husband throughout their marriage, taking the role of the lover, and the groom taking the role of the Beloved. However, the lava (interlinks of the Sikh marriage ceremony) makes clear that both the worldly bride and groom are the metaphorical human-brides walking a path together toward their Divine Spouse. A literal understanding of the lava can lead to normalizing a routine unequal power dynamic within the marriage and the household where the bride is dominated – is meant to serve – and the groom dominates – is meant to be served.⁴¹

This code continues with a gendering of roles and expectations:

He should then explain to the boy and girl individually their respective conjugal duties as husband and wife. The bridegroom should be told that the girl's people having chosen him as the fittest match from among a whole lot, he should regard his wife as his better half, accord to her unflinching love and share with her all that he has. In all situations, he should protect her person and honour, he should be completely loyal to her and he should show as much respect and consideration for her parents and relations as for his own.

The girl should be told that she has been joined in matrimony to her man in the hallowed presence of the Guru Granth Sahib and the congregation. She should ever harbour for him

*deferential solicitude, regard him the lord and master of her love and trust; she should remain firm in her loyalty to him and serve him in joy and sorrow and in every clime (native or foreign) and should show the same regard and consideration to his parents and relatives as she would, to her own parents and relatives.*⁴²

In the Rahit Maryada framing, although the groom is told to regard the bride as his better half and share with her all that he has, to be loyal and loving, and to respect her parents, the bride is meant to be deferential and regard and serve her husband as the lord and master of her love and trust in all matters regardless of location. In this framing, the groom is meant to protect the bride and her honor and ensure her compliance. These gendered expectations applied to both individuals have embedded an unequal power dynamic called marriage within them. While this is part of the language and reality of histories of gender domination in India at the time, it is still antithetical to Sikhi. The agency of the bride is once again removed, as the groom is said to have been chosen by “her people,” and she is said to be in need of protection and safekeeping. The bride is also firmly placed in the role of service and deference to her groom. Even as the groom is encouraged to be loyal and loving, the implication is that he is taking over the role of her father and keeper, as he is meant to protect her honor and her person.

The Rahit Maryada continues with women as the afterthought, and men as the central implied players in its codes, once again reflecting patriarchal culture over Sikh principles:

(p) Generally, no Sikh should marry a second wife if the first wife is alive.

(q) A baptized Sikh ought to get his wife baptized.

Sikh here means a Sikh man. In this guidance for what one ought to do if divorced, there is no statement on what a Sikh woman can do. A baptized Sikh here means a baptized Sikh man. The translation is inadequate because this is less of a baptism and more of an initiation into the Khalsa. “Getting his wife baptized” implies that the Sikh woman has no choice or say in the matter, that she is merely an extension of her husband, and that he holds agency, power, and ownership over what she does or does not do. That it is only through him that she can access her Guru.

What are the current global lived realities related to women and gender?

The current global realities are ones in which toxic masculinity pervades patriarchal society.⁴³ A patriarchy is a system of relationships, beliefs, and values embedded in political, social, and economic systems that structure gender inequality between men and women. Attributes seen as “feminine” or pertaining to women are undervalued, while attributes regarded as “masculine” or pertaining to men are privileged; this has happened over time. What counts as masculine/feminine also changes depending on the specific time period and geographical context. Masculinity encompasses the social expectations of being a man – providing for a heterosexual family, behaving in specific ways, and upholding particular cultural values of male power. The term “masculinity” refers to the roles, behaviors, and attributes considered appropriate for boys and men in a given society. Masculinity is constructed and defined socially, historically, and politically rather than biologically driven. Toxic masculinity is the cultural pressure developed in all communities for

boys and men to behave in ways that devalue their emotional growth to promote unhealthy types of male supremacist domination.

Gender-based treatment is experienced from birth onwards, with the color blue being designated masculine and the color pink being designated feminine, or the choice to have gender-reveal celebrations around the fetus' genitalia. This is seen in separating certain toys for children – trucks and Legos for boys, and dolls and kitchen sets for girls. And finally, this is seen in the way that children are socialized to behave. Boys are trained to be tough and aggressive and given more leeway to act out those emotions; they are encouraged to act for their own interests and thoughts first and consider any consequences second. Girls are trained to be sweet, shy, and restrained, and are given less leeway to be tough, aggressive, or outwardly express their emotions; they are encouraged to remain quiet and anticipate criticism made on behalf of their behavior being deemed good/bad for the family or community. The media and other cultural institutions enforce images of what it means to be any gender and gender identity – a boy, man, girl, and woman – and continue to objectify and stereotype the female body and create hierarchies that value bodies differently. Women still experience a skewed status in their families and communities, being overly exposed to familial control and criticism because they play a more active role at home and a less active role in public. In these spaces, women are still seen as objects and property of the men in their lives and are subjected to physical and emotional abuse. Men still hold power and privilege in public to define another person's role in society, and they reproduce that power at home.

Before addressing women and gender issues within the context of the Panth, it is important to first look at the general statistics on women in the regions of the world where the largest percentages of the Panth reside. These regions are India, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Malaysia. It is important to acknowledge that these statistics are limited in scope. For example, there are no measures for LGBTQIA+ violence, by which lesbian and transgender people are often affected. Other considerations should be made around how accurate statistics can be when affected by social and cultural constraints on reporting. Institutional bias exists against recording and processing cases involving women, trans people, and queer people. There is an institutional bias against recording abuse when perpetrators are affluent and powerful. For that reason, these statistics compiled by the United Nations are considered incomplete, but they are what is currently available and accessible to the public. The report would benefit from comprehensive Panjab-specific statistics, but this was not possible to locate with the UN indicators as a framework.

The United Nations uses a global indicator framework for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators and agreed upon in the 48th session of the UN Statistical Commission held in March of 2017. The framework includes 231 unique indicators, refined annually. It was reviewed comprehensively by the Statistical Commission at its 51st session in March 2020 and will be reviewed again in its 56th session, to be held in 2025.

India

In India, 83.3% of legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicator, with a focus on violence against women, are in place:

- The adolescent birth rate is 12.2 per 1,000 girls and women aged 15-19 as of 2018, up from 10.7 per 1,000 in 2016. This is negative because it means more young girls and women are giving birth than in 2018.
- In 2016, 72.8% of girls and women of reproductive age (15-49 years) had their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods.

However, work still needs to be done in India to achieve gender equality:

- 27.3% of women aged 20-24 were married or in a union before age 18.
- As of February 2021, only 14.4% of seats in Parliament were held by women.
- In 2018, 18.4% of girls and women aged 15-49 reported being subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.

As of December 2020, only 44.3% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas:

- Unpaid care and domestic work.
- Gender pay gap.
- Information and communications technology skills.

In addition, many areas – such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment – lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring.⁴⁴

Australia

In Australia, 100% of legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality under the SDG indicator, with a focus on violence against women, are in place:

- The adolescent birth rate is 9.4 per 1,000 girls and women aged 15-19 as of 2018, up from 10.1 per 1,000 in 2017. This is improvement, as fewer young girls and woman are giving birth.
- As of February 2021, 31.1% of seats in Parliament were held by women.

But work still needs to be done in Australia to achieve gender equality:

- In 2018, 2.9% of girls and women aged 15-49 years reported being subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.
- Women and girls aged 15+ spend 20.8% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 11.4% spent by men.

As of December 2020, only 48.4% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas:

- Gender pay gap.
- Information and communications technology skills.

In addition, many areas – such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment – lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring.⁴⁵

Malaysia

In Malaysia, the adolescent birth rate is 8.8 per 1,000 girls and women aged 15–19 as of 2018, down from 9.3 per 1,000 in 2017. This is an improvement. But only 75% of legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality under the SDG indicator, focusing on violence against women, are in place. Work still needs to be done in Malaysia to achieve gender equality:

- As of February 2021, only 14.9% of seats in Parliament were held by women.
- Women and girls aged 15+ spend 19.1% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 6% spent by men.

As of December 2020, only 45.1% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas:

- Violence against women and women in local governments.

In addition, many areas - such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment - lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring.⁴⁶

Canada

In Canada, the adolescent birth rate is 6.6 per 1,000 girls and women aged 15–19 as of 2018, down from 7.7 per 1,000 in 2017. This is an improvement. As of February 2021, 29.6% of seats in Parliament were held by women.

Work still needs to be done in Canada to achieve gender equality:

- In 2018, 2.6% of girls and women aged 15–49 years reported being subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.
- Women and girls aged 15+ spend 14.6% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 9.6% spent by men.

As of December 2020, only 36.4% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas:

- Gender pay gap.

- Information and communications technology skills.

In addition, many areas - such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment - lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring.⁴⁷

United States

In the United States, the adolescent birth rate is 17.4 per 1,000 girls and women aged 15-19 as of 2018, down from 18.6 per 1,000 in 2017. This is an improvement. As of February 2021, 27.3% of seats in Congress were held by women. In 2019, 78.4% of girls and women of reproductive age (15-49 years) had their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods.

However, work still needs to be done in the United States to achieve gender equality:

- In 2018, 6% of girls and women aged 15-49 reported being subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.
- Women and girls aged 15+ spend 15.3% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 9.7% spent by men.

As of December 2020, only 36.1% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas:

- Gender pay gap.
- Information and communications technology skills.
- Women in local governments.

In addition, many areas - such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment – lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring.⁴⁸

United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 83.3% of legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality under the SDG indicator, with a focus on violence against women, are in place:

- 0.1% of women aged 20-24 were married or in a union before age 18.
- The adolescent birth rate is 11.9 per 1,000 girls and women aged 15-19 as of 2018, down from 12.4 per 1,000 in 2017. This is an improvement.
- As of February 2021, 33.9% of seats in Parliament were held by women. In 2012, 86.5% of girls and women of reproductive age (15-49 years) had their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods.

Work still needs to be done in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to achieve gender equality:

- In 2018, 4.2% of girls and women aged 15–49 years reported that they had been subject to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.
- Women and girls aged 15+ spend 12.7% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 7% spent by men.

As of December 2020, only 46% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available. In addition, many areas – such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women’s access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment – lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring.⁴⁹

What are the current lived realities related to women and gender in the Panth?

In Sikh communities, culture plays a large role in practice rather than the Sikh paradigm given to us by the Guru. Some Sikhs tend to imbibe the Indic majority’s cultural and doctrinal stance on women. For example, in the *Manu Smriti*, a Hindu religious scripture, it is *written you have the right to beat drum, illiterate, Shūdra [low caste], animal and women*.⁵⁰ Male-oriented language and vocabulary has been introduced in some translations of Sikh scriptures, and rhetoric about justice and equality being Sikh values covers up the reality of inequality, misogyny, and sexism prevalent in our communities. Socioeconomically and with respect to casteism, some Sikhs still use marriage as a place for social and communal control. For example, they may continue to practice dowry and caste-based preferences for relationships and still put unrealistic expectations on women in public and private spheres. Furthermore, some Sikhs still practice sex selection and female infanticide. Sikhs still have abuse and honor killings taking place in some subsets of the community. This is true not just in the homeland but also in the diaspora, as culture greatly influences practice rather than the Sikh paradigm.

When it comes to the issue of female infanticide or feticide, the choice is often between abuse and honor, ridicule and prestige, vulnerability and security – women will choose honor, prestige, and security – and so, Panjabi-Sikh women choose to have sons. This is a symptom of a larger systemic issue and of practices and realities that set women up for harder lives: dowry practices, lower literacy rates, domestic violence and sexual abuse, and financial burden. Men and women take pride in having more sons than daughters because people still take “pity” on those who are not “blessed” with a son. Sons in the family are signs of strength and power, walking assurances of a continuation of the family name through generations. In patriarchal systems, power and status are secured through sons – sons are afforded a higher status and secure a higher status for the women who produce them. Thus, while sons are considered assets, daughters are perceived as liabilities. In a male-dominated power structure such as this, the presence of a female person in a family only really becomes legitimate if and when she is recognized as a girl and woman through her alignment with cultural norms and gives birth to a son, which serves to maintain further and extend the patriarchal power structure, and gives her a new and higher status within that structure.⁵¹

Popular culture (Panjabi, South Asian, and Western) celebrates and rewards particular types of masculinity. Sikh spaces also prioritize particular types of masculinity for various reasons. Dr. Geetanjali Singh Chanda explores inherent assumptions drawn from the Sikh doctrine that center men as the Sikh subjects and the Sikh identity as over-simplified into a primarily hyper-masculine warrior identity. Guru-personalities as “male” informs the collective understanding of what makes a Sikh.⁵² In these assumptions, unshorn hair and tying a turban are deemed the prerogatives of only men, unshorn hair is understood to mean the hair primarily on the head, and the turban is understood as being only for men. Women have a different set of rules that are largely placed around supporting the men in their lives, serving the men in their lives, and obeying the men in their lives. Sikh men must inhabit worlds in which they must live with legacies of being labeled a “martial race,” and Sikh women must inhabit worlds in which their history still has not been pulled out from under the history of Sikh men. Popular hypermasculine portrayals of the Gurus and the Sikhs are reiterated in Sikh oral traditions and sabads interpretations attributed to Guru Gobind Singh; the creation of the Khalsa Sikh identity is seen as a man-centered historical event, the Khalsa man is the marked body, and even the codes of conduct are gender-bound.

Dr. Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh writes:

“How do we find female themes and motifs here? The task is undoubtedly daunting. But it is critical, because generations of Sikhs have been fed on this overtly “patriarchal” discourse, producing and reproducing male dominant structures in their society. The Khalsa has remained a brotherhood, almost a militaristic fraternity, from which women have been pretty much excluded. The mentality of the crusader or mujahedin distorts the ideology of the Khalsa. The hypermasculine readings dwell on the surface of Guru Gobind Singh’s text without looking into its deeper meaning and texture. Men immediately identify themselves with the guru’s male sex; they mistake his zealous call for human rights as simply a fight for male rights, and they have not the least consideration for women’s subordination and oppression. Furthermore, Guru Gobind Singh’s battles against an oppressive regime are misunderstood as battles against another religion; forgetting Guru Gobind Singh’s pluralistic consciousness, Sikhs tend to misappropriate his commitment to pluralism as an exclusionist form of identity. The guru’s theological vision is neglected, and so is his compassionate and creative interior. Sikhs remember the fierce battle scenes depicted by the guru, but they miss out on how those very scenes lead to women, kitchens, sacred spaces, celebrations – to an authentic mode of life and living in our variegated world.”⁵³

The established norms mean that the roles of Sikh men and women are predefined; women do not have agency and instead serve to either bring honor or destroy honor in families and relationships with men, while men are told they must protect family honor. Women’s narratives and lives are lost to history, and those that are centered are centered only on loss and separation, while men’s stories are centered on honor and sacrifice. Women become passive people to whom history happens, while men are active subjects who have agency. Even the Panthak Ardas has changed. Singh and Kaur were titles among Sikhs since 1699, gifted by Guru Gobind Singh. Given the prevalence of patriarchal systems in the 18th century, “Singh” became synonymous with Khalsa.

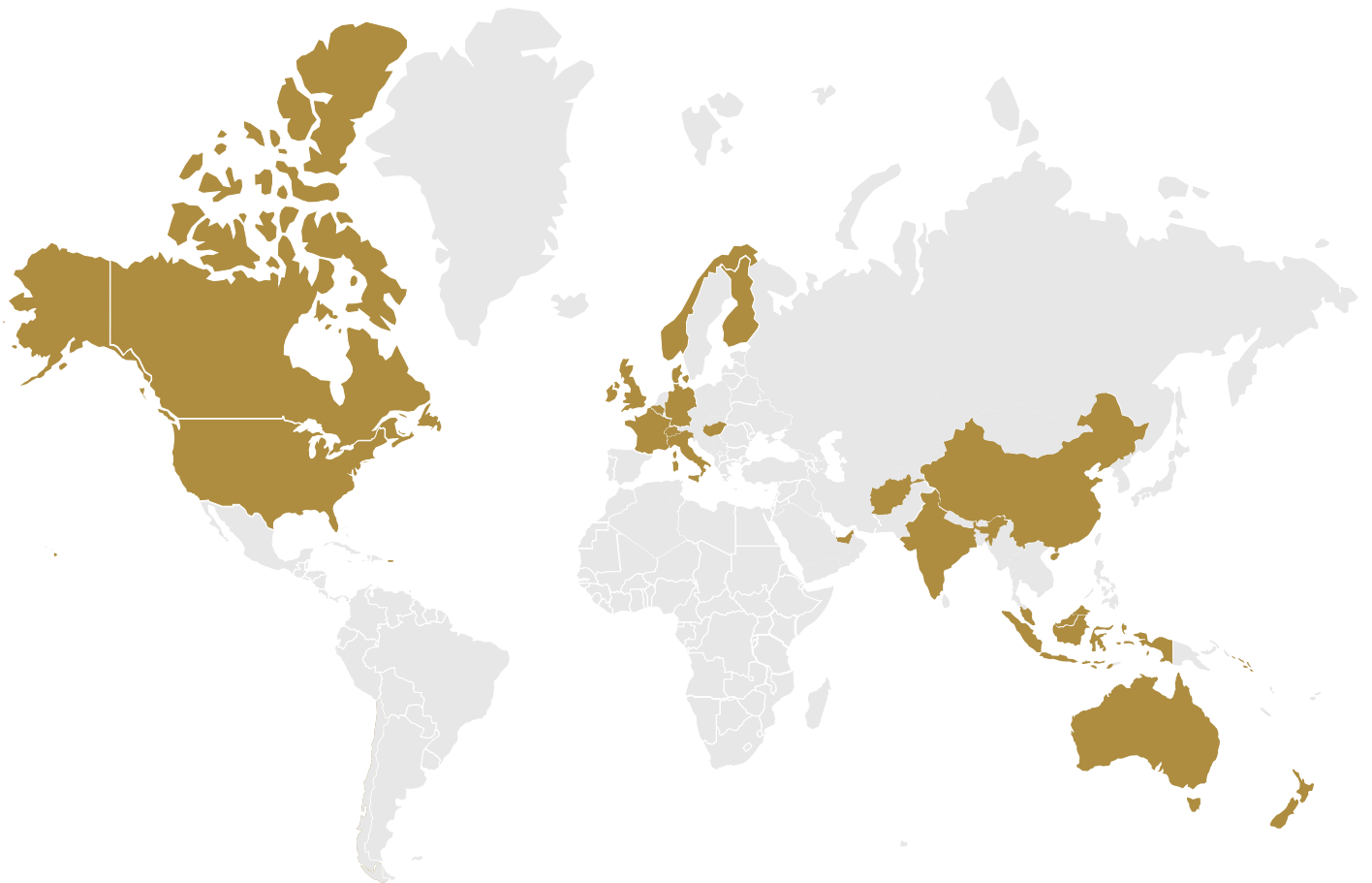
In *Mahan Kosh*, the entry for “Kaur” is in part defined as the title of the Singhni who is initiated. The entry for “Singhni” is defined as an initiated woman; woman of the Khalsa.⁵⁴

Singhni, much like the codes in the *Rahit Maryada*, ties the woman to her husband as an extension of him rather than an individual with agency and her own identity. All of this takes its toll on the collective Sikh psyche and manifests itself in the gendered roles we continue to impose despite our principles and ideals. Sri Harimandar Sahib still does not allow women to sing kirtan, Gurduaras around the world prohibit women from sitting behind the *palki* (canopy) due to concerns about menstruation and purity, and Sikh institutions and organizations do not have mandates that call for equal representation in staff, leadership, and boards. The language we use is often not in the spirit of Bani, policing and restricting women at every turn. We prioritize men in positions of power and leadership, we do not address women and gender issues in public spaces, and we do not prioritize participation from women outside of set hierarchies. When we do have women in positions of power or leadership, we use those small wins in the realm of representation as evidence that we have collectively lived out the ideals and principles that Bani gives us and ignore all of the ways we have failed to do so.

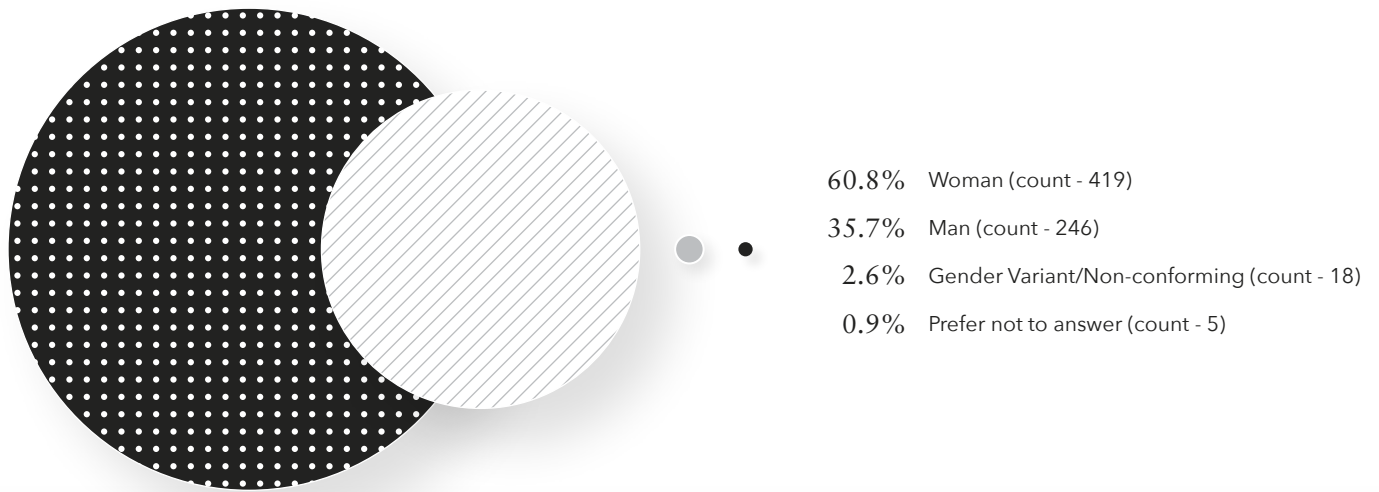
In reality, Bani provides a model for both understanding gender and the importance of cultivating the feminine and masculine within to transcend the gender binary. It offers us new ways to examine women’s issues and how they are policed and deemed less valuable in society. It is full of feminine vocabulary, symbolism, and behavior as a medium for self-realization and total freedom. It shows us that the feminine perspective and attitude bring the human experience to completion. The institution-building of the Guru period provides a model for identifying with women, addressing women’s issues with bravery, encouraging women’s participation in all realms, providing opportunities and leadership roles to women, and pursuing radical transformation of individuals and communities at large.

Survey / Opinion

An online survey was conducted, asking the global Sikh community about their understanding of Women & Gender. A total of 689 respondents from 21 countries participated in the survey. For the purpose of this research into the Sikh community, only respondents who identified as Sikhs were considered. The purpose of this survey was to gain insight into how Sikhs around the world understand gender equality, masculinity, and feminism within Sikh frameworks.

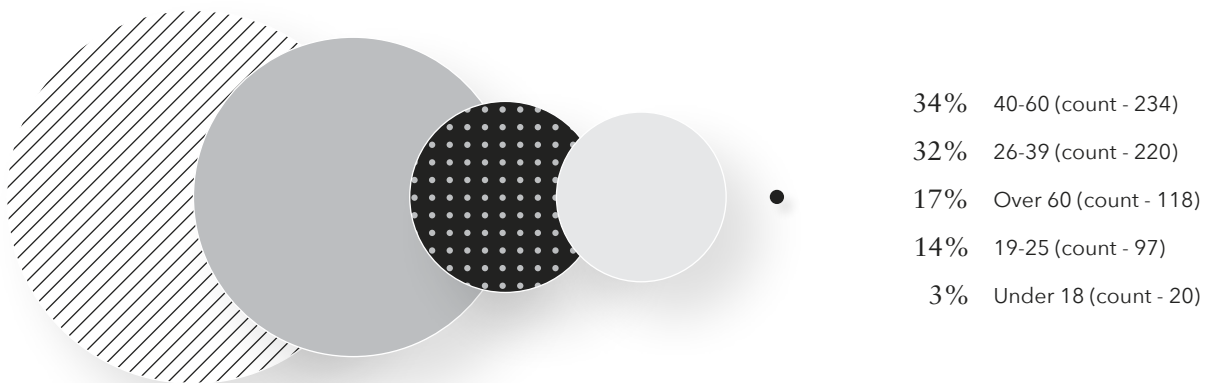


What gender do you most identify with?



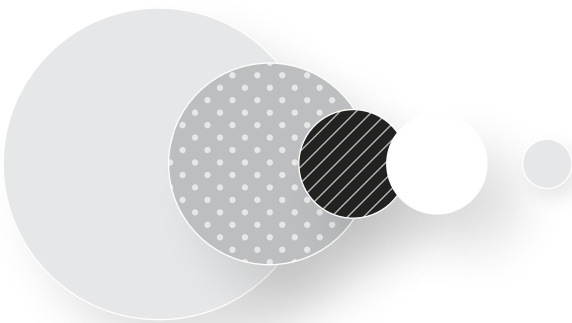
The majority of the responses were from Sikhs who identify as women.

What is your age group?



The majority of respondents were over 40 years old (34%), while the next largest percentage of respondents were between 26-39 (32%). This trend was similar even along gender identification lines. Results may more accurately reflect an older Sikh generation's perspective. The lack of response from the younger age range may point to a lack of interest or understanding of women and gender or, alternatively, a lack of trust in Sikh organizations to address this topic.

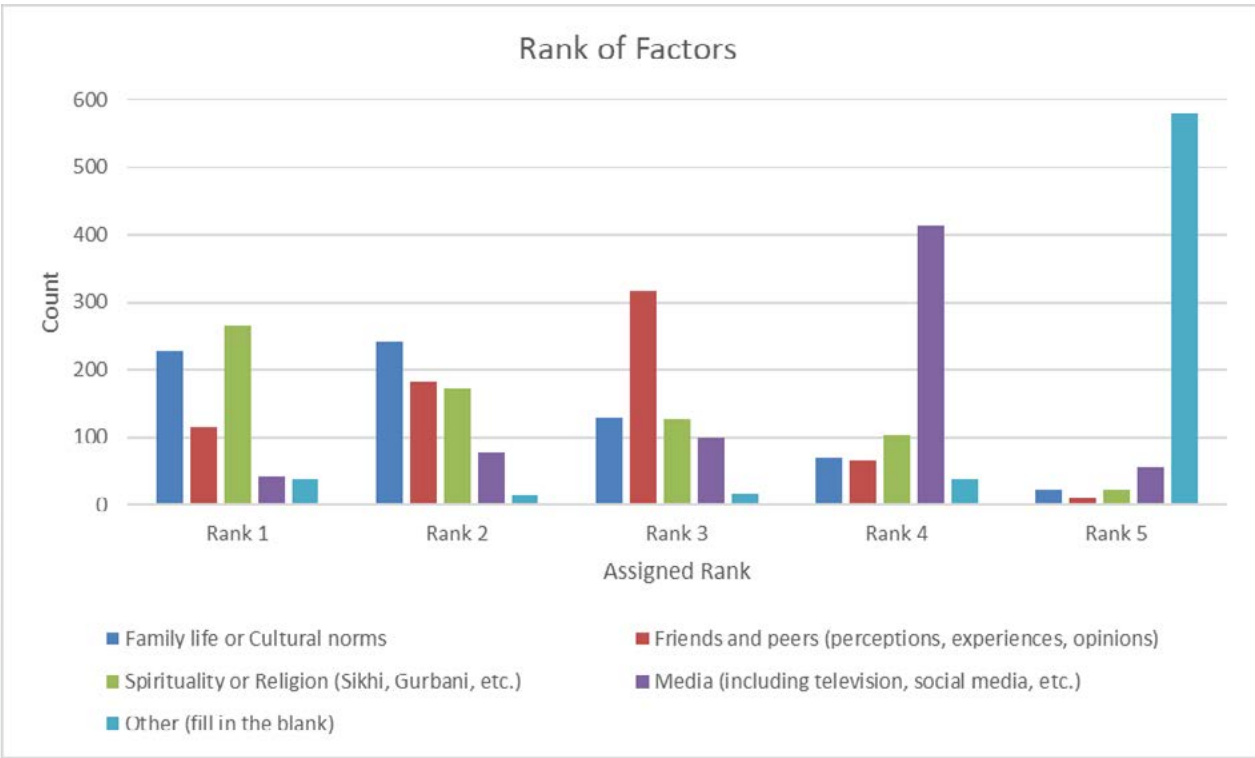
Where is your residence?



36%	United States (count - 249)
27%	Canada (count - 184)
14%	India (count - 97)
13%	United Kingdom (count - 89)
4%	Australia (count - 30)
1%	Malaysia (count - 10)

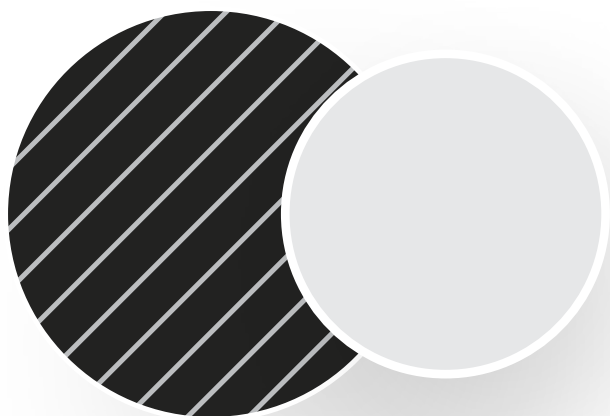
There were 21 unique countries represented among Sikh respondents. Over half of the responses come from North America (United States and Canada, 63%). Thus results may more accurately reflect a specifically North American Sikh perspective. All other countries not listed had between 1 to 8 respondents per country.

What factors inform your perspective on Women & Gender at large? Items ranked from most important (1) to least important (5)



The majority of respondents ranked spirituality or religion as the factor that most informs their perspective on women and gender at large. The second most influential primary factor was family life or cultural norms, while media was the least influential in informing perspectives.

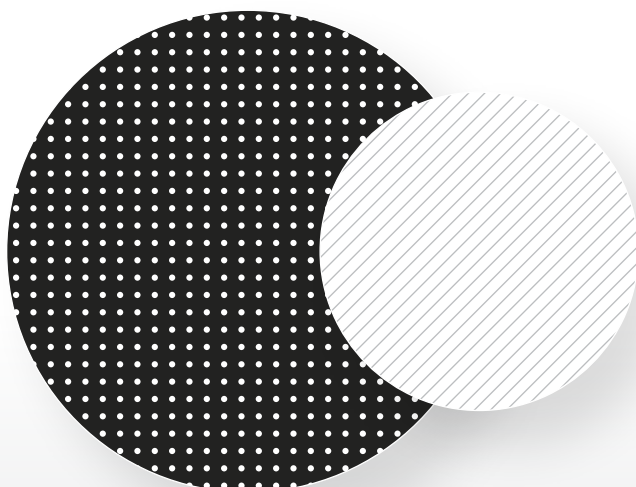
What best aligns with how you understand Sikh conceptions of Man and Woman?



- 86% Women and men may be the same or different, but they are equal with no gendered roles (count - 590)
- 14% Women and men are different and not equal, and thus fulfill different gendered roles (count - 99)

The majority of respondents (86%) understand that women and men may be the same or different, but they are equal with no gender-specific roles.

Is feminist advocacy anti-Sikh?

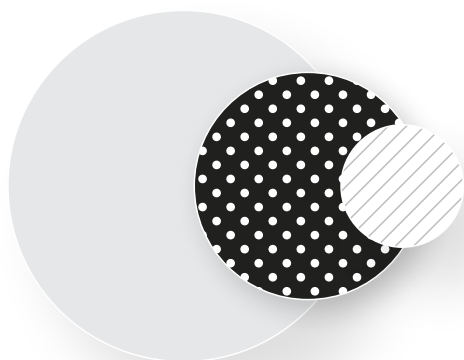


- 89% No (count - 612)
- 11% Yes (count - 77)

An even greater majority of respondents (89%) believe that feminist advocacy is not anti-Sikh, meaning that the majority of respondents believe Sikhi and feminist advocacy are not at odds with one another.

What is my ideal relationship with my gender identity?

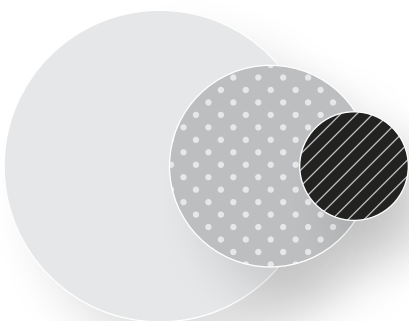
Note: Respondents could select more than one answer.



- 52.25% Exist in either 'man' or 'woman' binary identity (count - 360)
- 40.35% Transcend both 'man' and 'woman' binary identities (count - 278)
- 31.35% Encompass both 'man' and 'woman' binary identities (count - 216)

Although ideally, this question would have only allowed for one response, it is interesting to see what the most selected options were. The majority of respondents (52%) still think on some level within the binary, even if they selected both existing within the gender binary and encompassing or transcending both binary identities. More respondents selected "transcend both 'man' and 'woman' binary identities" (40.35%) than "encompass both 'man' and 'woman' binary identities," which could point to a vaster understanding of gender as a socially constructed category. Most respondents selected more than one option, which could point to understanding gender as fluid and one's relationship with gender as fluid and ever-changing.

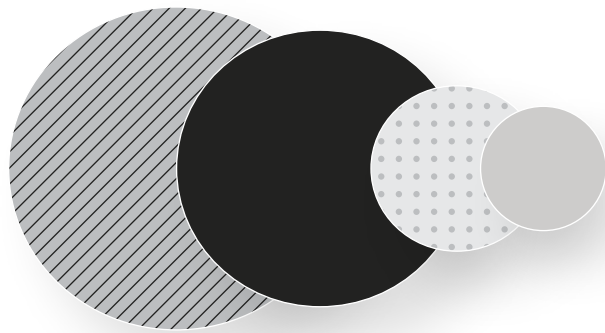
Who is responsible for addressing Women and Gender Issues in the Panth?



- 96% All Sikhs, regardless of their gender identity (count - 660)
- 3% Only women (count - 19)
- 1% Only men (count - 10)

An overwhelming majority of respondents believe that all Sikhs, regardless of gender identity, are responsible for addressing women and gender issues, pointing to an understanding of women and gender issues as a Panthic problem that requires the cooperation and investment of the Panth to solve.

Why is masculinity prioritized in Sikh spaces?



The majority of respondents (56%) believe that masculinity is prioritized in Sikh spaces because popular culture – whether Panjabi, South Asian or Western – prioritizes masculinity. A fifth of respondents (21%) believe this is due to Sikh identity being over-simplified into a primarily hyper-masculine warrior identity. In comparison, the least percentage of respondents (11%) believe this is due to the Guru-personalities as “male” informing understandings of what makes a Sikh.

How can Sikh institutions (not limited to Gurduaras, Akal Takht, and other authoritative bodies) address issues related to Women & Gender, including equal representation across institutions?

Top phrases included:

- Education: Covers comments on educating Sikhs about women and gender issues from a young age.
- Individual work and family responsibility: Individuals reflecting on their relationship with gender and the example set with gender dynamics in the home.
- Leadership and representation: Calls for supporting, encouraging, and engaging those who identify as women to take on leadership roles or speak up, both in Sikh organizations and institutions like the Gurduara; wanting to see a representation of non-men in Sikh spaces, especially in positions of power; wanting decision-making power to be in the hands of a more diverse group; having those who identify as women lead more conversations.
- Language: Covers using gender-neutral language in Bani translations and Sikh spaces more generally, being respectful in talking about those who identify as women.
- Justice and accountability structures: Calls for revoking the power of abusers and problematic men.

- Non-sexist religious practices: Calls for non-gender-segregated spaces, allowing those who identify as women to do kirtan, and take part in all forms of seva in the Gurduara.
- Removing barriers: Calls for financial aid, childcare, and other supports that might encourage or allow for increased involvement of those who identify as women in Sikh spaces.
- Sikh principles: Calls for more rooting in Sikh principles rather than culture or external ideas of women and gender, increased reliance on Sikh perspective and framework, and practicing what we preach.

There is a clear disconnect as the majority of respondents expressed the importance of addressing women and gender issues and an understanding of women and gender through a Sikh framework. Still, the realities do not reflect this understanding, as little is done to address these issues in the Panth. This may be because individuals do not feel they can change what they see as larger issues rooted in culture and tradition.

Recommendations

Individual

1. Seek guidance from Bani to understand how women are invoked in Bani generally and specifically. Reflect on the dynamic of Bani symbolism of all seekers as brides and the Divine as the Groom. Cultivate the feminine and masculine within, as 1-Divine is both yet transcends both, regardless of gender identity, and reflect on what it might mean to transcend these categories. Reflect on your relationship with gender and the example you set regarding gender dynamics in your own home.
2. Locate precedents from Sikh history for guidance on living out equality principles. Recognize how the Gurus addressed women and gender issues of their time. Recognize the women who helped shape Sikh history and the present, and ensure that they are not forgotten in the narrative of Sikhi.
3. Understand where there may be gaps in current codes of conduct and reflect on a more egalitarian framing. Recognize that women and gender issues are only solvable if Sikhs of all gender identities commit to addressing them.
4. Support, encourage, and engage those who identify as women to take on leadership roles in Sikh organizations and institutions like the Gurduara. Advocate for women in spheres of education, representation, justice and accountability, and religious participation and practice.
5. Form networks of support between those who identify as women to help build one another up and empower one another through a sense of community.



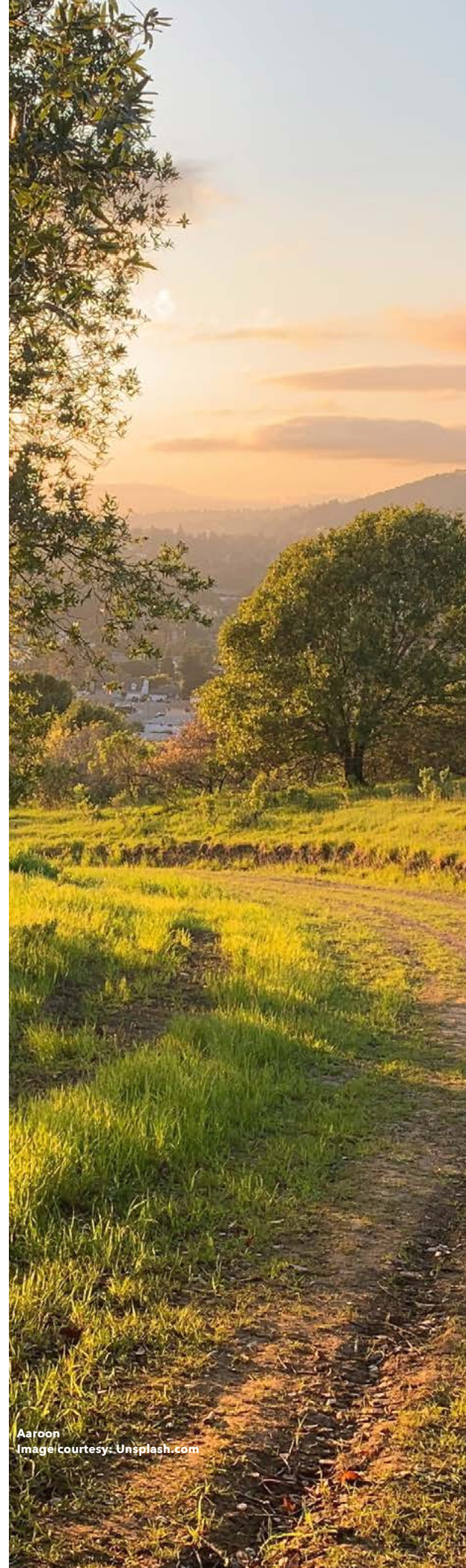
Benjamin Davies
Image courtesy: Unsplash.com

Recommendations

Institutional

1. Make mandates for those who identify as women as active members of boards, leadership, councils, panels, and staff. Make extra efforts, where necessary, to have non-men representation and involvement. Encourage and empower those who identify as women to participate in all forms of seva. Make institutions (including Gurduaras, SGPC, Akal Takht) and spaces safe, welcoming, and comfortable for those who identify as women.
2. Stay responsible and accountable to the community you serve by revoking the power of abusers or those who do not honor the foundational Sikh principle of equality.
3. Make an effort to use gender-neutral language in Bani translations and Sikh spaces more generally. Make an effort to remove barriers that keep women from participating fully in Sikh spaces and institutions through financial aid and childcare.
4. Educate Sikhs about women and gender issues and foster conversations in Sikh spaces.
5. Participate in women and gender forums, and create allyship on projects where Gurmat stand and project stands are similar.

Aaroon
Image courtesy: Unsplash.com



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xi. ਜਿਨਿ ਕੀਤੀ ਸੇ ਮੰਨਣਾ ਕੇ ਸਾਲੁ ਜਿਵਾਹੇ ਸਾਲੀ ॥
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xii. ਨਗਰੀ ਨਾਇਕੁ ਨਵਤਨੇ ਬਾਲਕੁ ਲੀਲ ਅਨੂਪੁ ॥
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xviii. ਜੈਸੀ ਮੈ ਆਵੈ ਖਸਮ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਤੈਸੜਾ ਕਰੀ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥
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ਆਪੈ ਦੋਸੁ ਨ ਦੇਈ ਕਰਤਾ ਜਮੁ ਕਰਿ ਮੁਗਲੁ ਚੜਾਇਆ ॥
ਏਤੀ ਮਾਰ ਪਈ ਕਰਲਾਣੇ ਤੈ ਕੀ ਦਰਦੁ ਨ ਆਇਆ ॥੧॥

xx. ਰਤਨ ਵਿਗਾੜਿ ਵਿਗੋਏ ਕੁਤੀ ਮੁਇਆ ਸਾਰ ਨ ਕਾਈ ॥

xxi. ਸੇ ਸਿਰ ਕਾਤੀ ਮੁੰਨੀਅਨਿ ਗਲ ਵਿਚਿ ਆਵੈ ਧੁੜਿ ॥
ਮਹਲਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਹੋਦੀਆ ਹੁਣਿ ਬਹਣਿ ਨ ਮਿਲਨਿ ਹਦੂਰਿ ॥੧॥

xxii. ਗਰੀ ਛੁਹਾਰੇ ਖਾਂਦੀਆ ਮਾਣਨਿ ਸੇਜੜੀਆ ॥
ਤਿਨ੍ ਗਲਿ ਸਿਲਕਾ ਪਾਈਆ ਤੁਟਨਿ ਮੋਤਸਰੀਆ ॥੩॥

xxiii. ਦੂਤਾ ਨੋ ਫੁਰਮਾਇਆ ਲੈ ਚਲੇ ਪਤਿ ਗਵਾਇ ॥

xxiv. ਇਕ ਹਿੰਦਵਾਣੀ ਅਵਰ ਤੁਰਕਾਣੀ ਭਟਿਆਣੀ ਠਕੁਰਾਣੀ ॥
ਇਕਨਾ ਪੇਰਣ ਸਿਰ ਖੁਰ ਪਾਟੇ ਇਕਨਾ ਵਾਸੁ ਮਸਾਣੀ ॥

xxv. ਸਾਹਾਂ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਗਵਾਈਆ ਰੰਗਿ ਤਮਾਸੈ ਚਾਇ ॥
ਬਾਬਰਵਾਣੀ ਫਿਰਿ ਗਈ ਕੁਇਰੁ ਨ ਰੋਟੀ ਖਾਇ ॥੫॥

xxvi. ਕੋਟੀ ਹੂ ਪੀਰ ਵਰਜਿ ਰਹਾਏ ਜਾ ਮੀਰੁ ਸੁਣਿਆ ਧਾਇਆ ॥
ਥਾਨ ਮੁਕਾਮ ਜਲੇ ਬਿਜ ਮੰਦਰ ਮੁਛਿ ਮੁਛਿ ਕੁਇਰ ਰੁਲਾਇਆ ॥
ਕੋਈ ਮੁਗਲੁ ਨ ਹੋਆ ਅੰਧਾ ਕਿਨੈ ਨ ਪਰਚਾ ਲਾਇਆ ॥੪॥
ਮੁਗਲ ਪਠਾਣਾ ਭਈ ਲੜਾਈ ਰਣ ਮਹਿ ਤੇਗ ਵਗਾਈ ॥
ਓਨੀ ਤੁਪਕ ਤਾਣਿ ਚਲਾਈ ਓਨੀ ਹਸਤਿ ਚਿੜਾਈ ॥

All transcreations are by Harinder Singh,
unless otherwise indicated.

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