

Women in the World

Islam

Muslim men are allowed to take up to four wives. In earlier times, male domination of women in Islamic societies was offset by the Qur'an's command that men treat women with respect.

There are strict rules regarding how Muslim women are to dress and appear in public. A strict, observant Muslim woman is to guard her modesty and veil herself (a chador) when in public. In modern life these traditions have been loosened or abandoned by many Islamic communities. A number of Muslim nations have been more secular and allow a less stringent observance of these practices. Muslim women also have the right to inherit, have dowries and own property.

Women in Medieval Europe

As a general rule women were subservient. Personal freedoms depended on her social status and where in Europe she lived.

Women in the lower classes were domestic labor, child raisers, housekeepers and farm laborers. In Medieval Europe, due to limited medical knowledge and poor hygiene, ten to fifteen percent of women died during childbirth.

In most parts of Europe women did have property rights and could inherit land. They often received dowries however in certain areas it was the reverse, the husband-to-be received the dowry. Women could separate from their husbands but divorce was very difficult. Women did have protection before the law but it was not always equal.

Except in Orthodox Byzantium, women could enter religious life. They could not become clergy or priests in the Catholic or Orthodox churches, but they could enter a convent and become nuns. During the High Middle Ages the majority of nuns came from the upper classes. Noble families had to provide potential husbands with land, money or a title so when such families could not afford they sent their younger daughters to a convent.

Noblewomen often managed their husbands' estates while they were away. Mothers of young kings whose fathers had died often served as regents and advisers until their sons became of age. Some women became queens but other lands, such as Germanic, French and the Holy Roman Empire did not allow them to inherit thrones. Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) married Louis VII of France then Henry II of England. She had a great deal of influence over both countries.

Women in Chinese Society

Confucianism and Chinese society created subordination of women. Most likely to have restrictions were upper-class women. Marriages were arranged mainly to benefit the groom and a dowry was always expected.

Foot-Binding, a painful practice was commonly used between 1200 and 1900. This process crippled women and made them stationary objects.

Lower class women in China were generally free of the restrictions seen in the upper classes. However they still held a second class status. In China women of all classes had inheritance and property rights and they did retain control over their dowries if their husbands died.

Women in Early Modern Europe

Roles varied according to class status and geography. Women in the upper class had access to education and participated in intellectual life. The emerging middle class saw more education for women and key roles as business owners, bookkeepers and operators of various enterprises, mostly with their husbands. Generally women of all classes were gaining more control over when and whom they married, as well as issues over divorce, childbirth and inheritances. However women were never equal to men; intellectually, economically, nor regarding status and rights. Death rates were still high during childbirth.

During the 1500s and 1600s women were approximately 75% of the witch hunts that took place. Catholics and Protestants stated that women were inferior and more sinful than men and used the bible to reinforce these ideas.

A select group, Catholic nuns, had excellent cultural and intellectual lives. Many nuns had a high level of education. In addition the Protestants who emphasized literacy had greater numbers of upper and middle class women gaining some degree of education.

Several women were Renaissance, Baroque and eighteenth-century painters. Women took part in scientific ventures but were not allowed to be faculty members of any university and they could not become members of any society of science. In the 1600's Margaret Cavendish (England) wrote several scientific papers and Maria Winkelmann (German astronomer) discovered a new comet.

During the 18th century and the Enlightenment women were commonly writers and philosophers. Some of the most important monarchs of the early modern period in Europe were women; Isabella of Castile (Spain), Elizabeth I of England, Maria Theresa of Austria and Catherine the Great of Russia.

Women in the Ottoman Empire

Within the elite class women were very important. The sultan's mother ran the household, became involved in diplomatic relations and controlled marriage alliances.

Despite stories the harem was a complex elite social network. Many members were previously slaves or prisoners (except none could be Muslim by law). Male members were trained for military or administrative positions, concubines were educated to read the Qur'an, to sew and to perform music. Harem members were ranked by status; some could even leave and marry officials. Few women in the imperial harem were used for sexual purposes, most were members of the sultan's extended family. These women also gained influence over male rulers by raising them as boys and training them to respect their guidance. Outside of the imperial family women were rarely seen in public around the major cities. They could own and retain property after marriage and could take part in the real estate market as long as they had a male agent. They could testify for themselves in court and could also start religious endowments.

Women in Mughal India

Women had certain rights in this society. Female aristocrats had titles, earned salaries, owned land and ran businesses. Some received an education and were allowed to express their talents openly. Women of all castes were permitted to augment their families' incomes by selling products, usually woven at home. In Indian society women could inherit land.

Mughals restarted women's rights by quoting Muslim laws. They were parallel to the same restrictions under Indian laws. Most women, especially those in the upper-class were bound to stay inside the house and the Hindu practice of sati was legal. All women were told to loyally serve under their husbands.

Women's Movements

A Vindication of the Rights of Women, written by Mary Wollstonecraft (English) in 1792 was one of the first works by a European feminist. She argued that the Enlightenment began reasoning for all human beings, including women. Therefore women should have equal rights in education, politics and economic ventures.

Frenchwoman Olympe de Gouges argued in her *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen* (during the French Revolution) that women be granted the same rights as men. In nineteenth century society the "**woman question**" was used during debates over equal rights. Early feminists stated that women had different strengths and abilities and should be allowed to develop them without social restrictions.

During the 1830's women's rights groups appeared in England and America. Early issues were reforming the family, changing divorce laws thus allowing women to own property and file for divorce. These changes took time, full property rights in Britain 1870, Germany 1900, and France in 1907. Many were frustrated because of the lack of civic rights so movements for other causes such as temperance, slavery abolition, improving schools, aiding the poor were postponed until later decades.

By the middle of the nineteenth century women began advocating for equal political rights, especially the right to vote. Suffrage was the initial step to political equality and full citizenship. As a rule women's movements in England and America were led by women in the upper classes. In Britain Emmeline Parkhurst led the national campaigns. In America the Seneca Falls Convention (NY State) saw women organize the Women's Rights Convention. They agreed that "**We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are equal.**" The two notable leaders in America were Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In Canada women led campaigns to outlaw the sale and distribution of alcohol, institute child welfare and labor reforms.

It was not until the end of World War I (thanks to home front campaigns) that women were granted the vote in Western countries. [The exceptions included Norway, Finland and a handful of U.S. States].

Women and Industrialization

The Industrial Revolution changed the old image that women worked alongside men on the farm or in the family business, meaning that motherhood and homemaking were not full time pursuits. The Industrial Revolution in the mid-to-late 1800's saw a workplace dominated by men and women taking on a domestic role. In the early nineteenth century men, women (and children) worked in factories. Before 1870 women made up close to 50% of the textile industry workforce. Most were lower class and often the only bread-winner, even though the income was considerably less than men. This also meant that women in the middle and upper classes had fewer opportunities to find employment.

Throughout the nineteenth century women worked in traditional roles; domestics or agricultural workers. Most working women were single, not married. By the end of the century large numbers of poor women were working outside of the home, in factories, mines, markets and on farms.

When laws changed regarding the number of hours that women could work, more women in working-class families stayed at home. Now men were again the bread-winners and women stayed at home. Any jobs taken by women were part-time. Families started to have fewer children, due to better child-labor laws and a decline in infant mortality rates. Children were now seen as dependents not wage earners.

By 1900 a mass consumer society emerged. New inventions such as sewing machines, clocks, cast-iron stoves allowed families a higher level of consumption and freed up time for women of all classes to pursue activities outside of the home.

African Women and European Imperialism

Colonial rule broke up many African families. Husbands worked on plantations or down the mines while wives and children stayed on the reserves or in the villages. Women grew the food, cared for the sick and aged. These marital separations led to prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases.

In general African men benefited from colonial rule. Colonial officials gave property rights to the male head of the household only. Teaching was male dominated and women in colonial Africa were discouraged from running businesses or selling goods in markets.

Women and the War Effort during World War I

While the men were fighting women worked as truck drivers, farmhands, factory workers, munitions workers and in many other occupations. In Britain over 1.35 million women who had never worked before took jobs. Rationing and conservation of products were primary goals only reached by the hard efforts of women. In Germany the Krupp factory (arms) had women as 38% of their workforce. France, a country against equal rights granted a minimum wage to women working in the uniform factories.

Women and the Shift in Gender Relations

In the twentieth century women's liberations or feminism affected just over half of the world's population. Progress mostly took place in the Western world with other areas slowly or partially changing.

After World War I women could vote in Russia, Sweden, Great Britain, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia and America. Italy and France failed to allow women to vote before World War II.

Between the 1920's and 1930's the numbers of working women decreased in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and militarist Japan as they did not believe in gender equality. The opposite was seen in Russia. Under Stalin's rule industry and agriculture plans put large numbers of women to work.

More women worked in factories during the Second World War than the first. Russian women were 40% of the national workforce. In American life "Rosie the Riveter" became a household name. American, British, and Canadian women served as military nurses and military personnel but not in combat. However some Russian women, though limited, saw active duty.

After World War II the numbers declines but their role in the workplace was now permanent. In 1945 women in France and Italy were finally allowed to vote.

During the 1940's and 1950's women in Japan, Western Europe, America and Canada made more money, were given higher positions and slowly became an integral part of the working lifestyles. In Russia and Eastern Europe more women worked than before. However society in general still saw women as the homemaker, child bearer and caregiver. Problems did emerge, such as gender discrimination, unequal wages, lack of leadership positions and sexual harassment.

The 1960's and 1970's was the era of "Women's Lib" (liberation). Major figures were Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963). The goal was not only to achieve legal equality but to eliminate the stereotype of the "weaker sex." Achievements included better and more diversified career opportunities, better pay, equal access to higher education, equal treatment for women's athletics, the right to birth control, the right to legal abortion, the right to divorce and a greater role in political life.

Though not all of the above goals have been fully reached there are still advancements being made in the modern age. There is still the "Glass-Ceiling" the incomplete access to the highest levels of business and political life. Many non-Western societies still stereotype and unequal treatment. Some of those who still see women as inferior are Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Latin American societies. Islamic fundamentalism and conservative Catholics still berate women. Machismo and views that women are inferior still exist. In 1989 the Taliban in Afghanistan deprived women of most rights, and anyone caught received harsh penalties. For example a woman cannot walk in public unless escorted by a man. Someday there may be a woman president in America, after all India, Great Britain and Israel have all had women successfully running their nations!