

GENDER

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Overview The big markers in world history – the advent of agriculture and then the rise of industrial society – particularly shape gender patterns. Developments within the Agricultural Age include some important regional variants on the common patriarchal system, and also the impact of the major religions. Regional diversities continue in the modern periods, though there are some common trends.

The Impact of Agriculture Hunting and gathering societies, though they divide labor by gender, maintain some equality between men and women. Women often participate in councils, and the importance of their work is recognized. But agriculture brought a decided emphasis on male predominance, or patriarchy. Higher birth rates limited women's participation in the most productive labor, in most societies; their work remained vital, but it occurred in and around the home. The importance of property inheritance increased the apparent social need to identify paternity of children – and this in turn generated intense interest in regulating female sexuality and, usually, seeking to confine it to marriage. Gender differences were most marked in the upper classes, where women's labor was less essential, but they had wide results. The rise of civilizations formalized patriarchal systems, for example in the early law codes. Women were punished more heavily for sexual offenses than men; they received smaller shares of inheritance. Practices of infanticide focused on killing unwanted female children, because this more directly affected birth rates and because sons were more important. Women were not slaves; husbands owed them support, otherwise women could legitimately leave and return to family of origin. But the disparities were marked.

Regional Styles Regional differences, within this framework, are not always easy to explain. Women's status was higher in ancient Egypt than in Mesopotamia; there were even some important female rulers. China defined patriarchy in Confucian terms: women owed men deference, but they could wield considerable power in the household, and widows, through relations with sons and control over daughters-in-law, might have wider authority. Indian culture emphasized women's duties to men; there were even debates as to whether women could advance spiritually, in later existences, without first becoming men. But women's beauty and wit might be much admired. Classical Greece confined respectable women to the household, but in Rome at various points women gained a bit more latitude. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, though patriarchy took root, dowries went to the wife and her family, not the husband, which reflected somewhat greater prestige for women in marriage. In most other societies, dowries, intended to help a new couple establish economically, sought mainly to attract the groom and his parents. Polygamy was another regional variable: common in Chinese and later Islamic upper classes, but not countenanced in India or Christian Europe.

Religion The three missionary religions all insisted that women were spiritually equal to men; in Islam and Christianity, they had souls. This huge change opened new opportunities for women in spiritual life, and in Buddhism and Christianity convents gave a few women important roles outside of marriage. The religions also worked to ban infanticide, which could have significant results for women and girls. Islam, also, very clearly insisted that women had property rights and that, within marriage, they also deserved sexual pleasure. But despite significant changes, the religions did not dismantle patriarchy. Women were seen as more likely sinners, in Christianity and Islam. Buddha, somewhat hesitant about women, made it clear that convents should be under the control of male monasteries. Women worshipped separately from men in Islam (as in Judaism). Their property and divorce rights were more constricted than was the case for men. They could not become priests, in Christianity. In some cases – as in Chinese Buddhism – religion may have distracted women from other issues, as their husbands might note. Further, during the post classical period, other developments pressed the patriarchal system further. Most important was the gradual spread, in upper and urban classes in China, of the practice of footbinding, which limited women's mobility. In the Middle East the practice of veiling spread more widely (reviving an earlier Mesopotamian custom). In India the custom of sati arose, though not too widely, in which a widow was supposed to throw herself on the husband's funeral pyre, because her life was useless without a husband. In Japan, contacts with China lowered women's status, though the practice of footbinding was not adopted. On the whole, during the postclassical period, many societies used growing commercial prosperity to heighten female inferiority – again, mainly in the upper and urban classes where their physical labor was not essential.

The Early Modern Period No general changes marked these centuries. But the Atlantic slave trade, seizing more men than women, disrupted gender patterns in West Africa. Polygamy spread as a result of an excess of women. In Latin America, many Spanish colonists took native mistresses or exploited natives sexually, in part because initially few European women migrated; the result was a significant level of racial mixing and also high rates of illegitimacy. European colonists in both American continents criticized native gender practices, often urging more control over female sexuality and clearer dominance for husbands in the family. In Europe, Protestantism attacked convents and monasteries, eliminating one recourse for women; but it stressed the importance of marriage and ultimately encouraged more attention to congenial relationships in the family.

The Impact of Industrialization Industrialization did not quickly alter gender relations. Many women joined the factory labor force, prized for lower wages; the displacement of domestic manufacturing affected women disproportionately. Over time, however, industrialization generated some clearer changes. A number of factors encouraged new laws regulating women's hours of work. More generally, it became difficult for many women to continue to work outside the home after marriage, which meant that their labor force participation declined on average in most industrial centers. At the same time, new education systems involved girls as well as boys; and wherever women's education gained, new ideas about limiting the birth rate also developed. And the gradual actual decline of the birth rate created additional changes for women as well. Accompanying all this, in Western society, was a new set of ideas about women. Amid rapid social change, women's family role and basic morality received new praise, creating some interesting tensions with continued male claims of superiority. And, springing from Enlightenment ideas, new claims for women's rights gradually emerged – becoming significant particularly after 1850. Individual women pressed into law schools and medical schools. Reforms in many countries gave women more equal property and divorce rights, and in several countries women also won the right to vote before 1914. Formal feminist organizations took root in many Western nations, and several international groups formed by the 1880s.

Outside the West The first industrial century also brought complex influences to bear on gender in other regions. The spread of imperialism, for example in Africa, brought new Western criticism of some local customs, again resulting in laws that often increased the power of husbands in families. The competition of factory exports reduced economic opportunities for women in domestic manufacturing. In Africa again, men tended to seek the new jobs in the cities and the mining industry, creating new gender gaps as many women remained in the villages. Western influence also, however, encouraged some other reforms, particularly by the later 19th century. British authorities combatted the practice of sati, joined by some Indian reformers. Missionaries helped sponsor a campaign against Chinese footbinding, joined by Chinese reformers; and the practice began to decline. Some new educational opportunities opened for women. And while Japanese leaders were shocked at the degree of independence women had in the West, when they visited, the new Japanese educational requirements involved girls as well as boys.

The Contemporary Period Several global trends suggested the beginning of the end of formal patriarchy, from the early 20th century onward. Most countries, at some point in the century, gave women the right to vote. In many countries, though gradually, women rose to greater participation as elected officials, even national leaders. Women's access to education might not yet equal that of men, but everywhere they gained ground, ultimately even at the university level. Reforms in many countries protected property rights and increased access to divorce. The global decline of the birth rate – often spurred by women, sometimes against their husbands' opposition – was a huge change. Furthermore, particularly from 1945 onward, international declarations increasingly insisted on women's legal and economic equality. The United Nations regularly sponsored conferences stressing women's rights, spurring new feminist organizations in many countries.

Complexities Limitations to change were important as well, qualifying any idea that patriarchy had ended. Globally, women's wages lagged behind those of men for similar work – even when educational levels had equalized. Women might gain in legislature—in many Latin American countries, they held up to 40% of all slots – but they seldom won equality and in some countries, like the United States with 19% of all congresspeople female by 2014, they did not advance comparably in the first place. Women's new roles might spark violence against them, including rape, a clear and probably growing problem for example in south Asia. Islam faced particularly tense questions about change and continuity. On the one hand, the common patterns of change affected women in many Muslim countries, including new access to education. Reformers in places like Turkey had stressed gender change. On the other hand there was great male resistance, particularly in more conservative countries, including insistence on traditional punishments for cases of female adultery (sometimes including male offenders as well) and on other

implementations of Sharia law. In Afghanistan and Pakistan there was even violent resistance to schooling for girls. Many women themselves hesitated about change. Many preferred traditional styles of dress, for example, sometimes including veiling. Gender change frequently seemed to be a foreign (Western) imposition, and this might support a maintenance of earlier tradition in response. Complexities and regional differentials continued to shape global patterns of gender.

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Gender and the Politics of History. By Joan Wallach Scott (Columbia University Press, 1999).

Gender in World History. By Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2015).

Gender in History: Global Perspectives. By Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

Discussion

1. When did patriarchy begin? How was society organized before this? What changes caused the development of gender inequality?
2. Compare the gender ideas and impacts of the major religions. Did some religions affect or improve women's conditions more than others?
3. What were the main regional differences in gender conditions during the Agricultural Age?
4. What has the role of the state been in reinforcing patriarchy?
5. What factors have modified patriarchy in modern world history? What have the most significant modifications been?
6. What factors explain the high percentage of female politicians in contemporary Latin America?
7. What roles have women played in modern science? What have the main constraints been?
8. What are the challenges of incorporating gender in world history? What are the main problems in the current way scholarship incorporates gender?