

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Peter N. Stearns, Ph.D.

GENDER IN HISTORY – The contemporary period: 1914-21st Century

General features This was a period of rapid global change in gender relations. Huge gender inequalities persisted but in almost all societies the full apparatus of a patriarchal system had been dismantled by the 21st century, particularly in politics and education. Rapid birth rate decline contributed to widespread change as well. And women's rights were routinely enshrined in any global statement of human rights. At the same time, regional variety persisted, based in part on prior traditions, and quite widely women's economic conditions lagged behind other gains.

Variations Assessment is complicated by significant regional variations based both on cultural framework and different levels of economic development. Particular regimes also stand out for a distinctive approach. Nazi Germany, for example, urged women to abandon consumerism in favor of traditional dress, while concentrating on bearing and raising children. The Iranian revolution of 1979 introduced reemphasis on concealing clothing for women, though in other domains significant changes continued. More recently the Taliban in Afghanistan has taken an even more radical stance, reducing or eliminating any educational opportunities for girls while enforcing traditional dress. Communist regimes, in Russia after 1917, in China after 1949, concentrated more on social class reform, and economic development, than on gender issues. But they expanded educational and job opportunities for women (though often at lower rates of pay) and tried to reduce other traditional restrictions on women; in China, for example, the regime opposed arranged marriages, insisting on the consent of both parties. On the other hand the regime after 1978, fighting overpopulation, set severe limits on the number of children a couple could have, in some cases requiring abortions or even sterilization; and in practice the result also led to a higher ratio of male babies (reflecting traditional preferences), as some couples left female infants to orphanages or possibly even killed them.

Feminism and women's rights Feminist movements of various sorts spread widely. In Japan agitation by women's groups in the 1930s helped set the stage for achievement of voting rights after the war. In the West "second-stage" feminism began focusing on economic rights and reducing male-female differentials more systematically, beyond earlier goals like the vote. Pressure from women's groups encouraged the League of Nations to note the issues involved, and then after World War II the United Nations promoted women's rights quite vigorously. Gender equality was written into the Universal Charter of Human Rights in 1948, and the UN held periodic conferences to promote greater gender equality. The theme was taken up by various regional organizations, such as the African Union. It also won support from Amnesty International and other international non-government organizations, which by 2000 were actively supporting greater freedom from sexual harassment and seeking punishments for rape as a war crime. In some areas second-wave feminism also encouraged reconsideration of male roles, toward more family involvement and more open expression of emotion, though results here were mixed.

Basic trends: education Advances in education were striking, through most of the century. Some regions lacked resources for universal education, and this sometimes encouraged remnants of a gender gap. Mothers often played an active role in seeking more education for their daughters, eager to provide opportunities they themselves lacked. This was a major motive in birth rate reduction, in places like Latin America. In most countries women's literacy caught up with men's. Communist governments actively promoted education for women, and this was a major theme in the top-down reform effort by Kemal Ataturk in Turkey. By the later 20th century in some places women's educational levels surpassed those of men: this was true among college graduates in the United States from the 1980s onward, and also in Iran by the 21st century (where 55% of university students were female). Gender differences did continue to affect science and engineering, but even here disparities declined.

Voting rights and political participation Women's suffrage spread widely in Europe after World War I, including communist Russia. Another wave occurred after World War II, with Catholic countries in Europe and also Latin America (Mexico, 1953). Most "new nations" included female suffrage, including India and most African countries. By the 21st century the pattern was almost universal, as even Saudi Arabia, long a conservative holdout, began allowing women to vote in local elections. Some countries went further.

India, for example, took active steps to make sure women could vote independent of fathers and husbands. Some countries (France, India, parts of Latin America) began requiring that a certain percentage of candidates be female. In many countries women gained growing participation in elected offices; the increase in Latin America was particularly striking. Women leaders became common in Scandinavia and more occasionally elsewhere (including Pakistan, India, Turkey, Japan) – though a few places, like the United States, held back. And women’s role in other seats of power, such as corporate boards, continued to lag.

Birth rates and family forms Birth rates declined in most parts of the world, particularly from the second half of the 20th century onward. Latin America, for example, went through its demographic transition in the 1970s, with women often taking the lead in using contraception and explicitly trying to cut back in favor of greater opportunities for the children born. Iranian birth rates declined notably a decade or so later. Rates remained unusually high in sub-Saharan Africa, though here too there was a downward trend. In many industrialized societies by the 21st century – Western Europe, the United States, East Asia including China- birth rates dropped well below population replacement levels. Not only were women delaying child birth, in favor of establishing themselves in the job market, in some cases they no longer wanted children, or more than one child, because of the costs involved and the interference with other life goals. Government efforts to induce more births were not very successful. Marriage also changed. Rates of child marriage declined, though this was still an issue in South Asia and the Middle East. Arranged marriages also dropped off, though they remained common in India. In the West, by the 21st century, many men and women avoided marriage altogether, in favor of informal (sometimes unstable) relationships or living singly.

Work and economic inequality Economic patterns varied widely and were less consistently favorable to women than the trends in education, politics and demography. Educational improvements provided new opportunities, as did the rise of white collar jobs in many economies; and in many places women entered professions like medicine in large numbers. In some regions, however, traditional caution about women’s public roles restricted opportunities: thus in the Middle East in the early 21st century only about 25% of the labor force was female. Everywhere, women’s pay lagged behind men’s for equivalent jobs. On the other hand, many women took advantage of training in fields like teaching and nursing; thousands of women from the Philippines won jobs in other countries in these fields, and also in the recreation industry. In Western Europe and the United States, large numbers of married women entered the formal work force in the 1960s and 1970s, rising to around 45% of the total labor force, a major change that reversed earlier industrial patterns. Women in Japan lagged slightly, but then began to participate more widely by the 21st century, though prejudice and limited facilities for child care continued to play a role.

Other changes Women’s participation in sports soared after World War II, with growing international attention to women’s performance in tennis, soccer football, and the Olympics. Most regions participated actively, though India and the Middle East lagged somewhat. On another front, women gained active participation in the military in a number of countries, an intriguing modification of traditional patterns that reflected not only new women’s demands but also the increasing reliance on sophisticated technology over older tactics. In yet another domain, the rise of movies, television and popular music, in some cases from the early 20th century onward, gave top female performers huge audiences, significant earnings and considerable stylistic influence, from Hollywood to Bollywood and beyond, though of course male entertainers made some similar gains and in certain fields continued to out-earn women.

Sex and sexual exploitation Consumer culture in many regions suggested loosening restrictions on female sexuality. Dress became more informal in many areas, and female sexuality figured prominently in advertisements and popular entertainment. After World War II beauty contests became common in most parts of the world, to the dismay of conservative critics. In the West advice manuals began to urge more attention to female sexual pleasure. A “sexual revolution” around 1960, based in part on wider access to contraception, involved growing rates of sexual activity before marriage, in many industrial societies including Japan as well as the West. At the same time, new or at least more visible problems arose. In Western society, by the 1980s, feminist leaders began to call attention to sexual pressures on women at work, introducing a new concept of sexual harassment. Poverty and displacement – for example, in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism -- opened many women to sexual exploitation, including seizure in the global sex trade. “Sexual tourism” developed in a number of places, such as Thailand,

based on access to prostitutes. In another intriguing development, sexual activity seems to have declined in a number of places since the 1990s, both before and during marriage; explanations are as yet unclear, though they could include the impact of growing access to Internet pornography.

Balance sheet The contemporary period has unquestionably seen unusually extensive changes in gender relations, more extensive than in any previous single century and particularly involving new activities and opportunities for women. Male reactions are harder to chart, ranging from adjustment to complaints and even acts of violence, such as recurrent attacks on schoolgirls in South Asia. While general trends are important, regional variations loom large as well. Some observers have argued that adjustments have been particularly difficult, and often limited, in regions with traditions of female seclusion, such as the Middle East and South Asia, compared to areas like China where patriarchal control had taken somewhat different forms. The religious variable is clearly important, in determining levels of change and resistance, within regions (like the United States) as well as globally. Different trajectories, for example between political and educational rights versus access to political and economic power, also complicate overall evaluations. In many regions gender patterns remain in considerable flux.

Study questions

1. Has the contemporary period seen the end of traditional patriarchal structures for gender relations? What are the main complexities in addressing this questions.
2. What has been the relationship between changes in women's education and reduction of the birth rate, in many parts of the world?
3. Why and how have economic opportunities for women lagged behind changes in education and political rights?
4. Have gender patterns become increasingly "globalized", particularly since World War II?

Further reading

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