HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE GENDER IN HISTORY – Ancient Period

Basic features   As river valley civilizations took shape, first in Mesopotamia and Egypt, followed by the great classical civilizations in Persia, China, India and the Mediterranean, they formalized many basic features of the patriarchal gender system – though the fundamental features had almost certainly developed earlier. This included appropriate provisions in the law codes commonly issued by the governments involved. Also, thanks to the introduction of writing in these societies, other records concerning the gender systems began to emerge. At the same time, each region began to shape its own approach to patriarchal gender relations, creating comparative issues and challenges in gender history.

Mesopotamia   The Law Codes of king Hammurabi, issued around 1700 BCE, clearly spelled out unequal relationships between men and women, and more specifically husbands and wives. The Code decreed that a woman "who has not been a careful housewife, has gadded about, has neglected her house and has belittled her husband" should be "thrown into the water" as punishment. Characteristically also, punishment for adultery bore more heavily on women than on men, and men had more reasons they could legitimately cast wives out the family – including, obviously, careless housework. The Code also clarified male control over most property, along with inequalities in wealth between the genders. Though in most respects wives were treated as if owned by their husbands, male control was not unlimited. At least In principle, a wife could legitimately leave a husband if he systematically failed to provide. Mesopotamia also relied heavily on infanticide as a means of property control, in which unwanted babies would be killed, usually by being abandoned in some isolated spot. Gender factored in here as well, female infants were far more commonly victims than male, both because this served more directly to limit family size but also because boys were more valued. On yet another front: Mesopotamian records clearly listed prostitution as a profession – reflecting the economic difficulties unattached women encountered as well as male appetites, at least in the cities.

Comparative issues   Many features of gender relations in other early civilizations replicated those in Mesopotamia, including infanticide (in China, for example) and urban prostitution. However, significant differences emerged as well, though the causes are not always clear. Thus early Egyptian civilization attributed more value to women than its Mesopotamian neighbor. Infanticide was not practiced (possibly reflecting the greater prosperity of Nile River agriculture) – to the amazement of many visitors from other regions. A number of individual women exercised considerable power as rulers – like Queen Nefertiti, wife of the pharaoh Akhenaton, who played an active role in settling religious disputes during his reign. Women were also prominently displayed in Egyptian art, served as powerful priestesses in the Egyptian religion, and were sometimes treated to the same elaborate burial practices, including mummification, available for upper-class men in preparation for an afterlife. On the other hand, basic gender inequality was clear in Egypt as well. As one writer, Ptah Hotep, put it (in what was arguably a mild definition of patriarchy): "If you are a man of note, found for yourself a household, and love your wife at home…Fill her belly, clothe her back…But hold her back from getting the mastery."

Classical models   The civilizations that emerged in Asia, north Africa, and southern Europe after 800 BCE continued to elaborate patriarchal systems, though again with different regional emphases. In China, Confucianism emphasized the importance of the authority of husband and father in the family, as a microcosm of an orderly state (itself ruled by a male emperor with only one real exception). Upper-class men often took on concubines as well as a wife, both for sexual enjoyment and to help assure the birth of male heirs; this system was recognized and regulated, among other thing to preserve some priority for the initial wife. An influential advice manual for women, written by Ban Zhao, an extraordinary and highly educated upper-class woman, stressed the importance of wifely humility: "Humility means yielding and acting respectful, putting others first…enduring insults and bearing with mistreatment." In classical India, Hindu philosophers debated a crucial issue, given the religion's emphasis on reincarnation and potential spiritual advancement after death: did a woman, to advance, need first to become male in the next life, or could she progress while remaining female? – and the issue was not clearly resolved. Wives were also expected to perform religious sacrifices, but only in their husbands' name, not their own. Both in China

and India marriages were carefully arranged, with the brides' families obligated to provide a suitable dowry. In both societies (though the evidence is somewhat clearer in classical China) physical violence against wives to keep them in line was not uncommon. In both societies, however, female beauty and talent were also prized (here, most explicitly in India). Also in India, the famous manual on sexual and emotional pleasure, the *Kama Sutra* (written sometime between 400 BCE and 300 CE) emphasized the importance of attending to women's needs as well as men's. Here again, patriarchy in practice could be complicated.

Classical Greece and Rome   Both Greek and Roman law emphasized gender inequality. In Athenian law, adultery of a married woman was regarded as a more serious crime than rape of an unmarried woman, since it violated the property rights of the husband. Roman law also imposed harsh punishments for sexual offenses: "The husband is the judge of his wife. If she commits a fault, he punishes her; if she has drunk wine, he condemns her; if she has been guilty of adultery, he kills her." Greek philosophers did not discuss gender elaborately, but Aristotle, in particular, highlighted the intellectual inferiority of women: "the man is superior by nature, and ruler." Aristotle granted that family life could not be happy unless women were content, but true happiness, which involved service to society, was beyond a woman's grasp. All public roles must be male, though the philosopher granted that women could have some subordinate authority in keeping a good household. While Roman law in principle insisted on monogamy, in practice emperors and other upper-class men fairly openly took on concubines. Julius Caesar actually divorced a wife despite no clear evidence of wrongdoing, insisting that wives must be "above reproach." However, inequality was not the only theme –as in the other classical civilizations. Some important women writers flourished in Greece, and women were allowed to attend plays and religious festivals. Roman patterns were even more complex. Punishments for adultery eased over time, for example—at one point involving only the loss of some of a woman's property. At one point even the Roman Senate paid attention to women's needs, in a debate over importing luxury goods like silks; while conservatives argued that women's frivolity should be restrained, others pointed out their selfless service to the family, and therefore to society, which deserved some reward through decorative consumer items.

Other issues   Several other themes complicate the assessment of gender relations in classical societies. Definitions of masculinity varied. Chinese culture, particularly under Confucianism, placed less emphasis on military virtues than did Greece and particularly imperial Rome: scholarship and bureaucratic service were more important. While India had a warrior caste, the highest Brahmin caste was priestly, and boys indeed were systematically trained in religious rituals and spirituality rather than martial arts. Both in fiction and in fact, the classical societies also could single out unusual women. Hindu epics included women who performed heroic service in rescuing fathers and husbands. Greek plays often highlighted the complexity of women's roles, while the poet Homer's account of the Trojan wars made it clear that rivalry for a beautiful woman was at the root of the conflict. In China, Ban Zhao might praise female humility, but she also emphasized that women had vital roles to play in the family; and she herself gained fame not only as author but as advisor to emperors. Finally, the classical period also made it clear that women could wield considerable power and influence, however informally, particularly through their carefully-prepared roles as mothers of sons. This was a theme in China, where a number of accounts featured influential men who were careful to take their mothers' wishes into account, sometimes in preference to their own interests.

Religion   Polytheistic religions predominated during the ancient period, and they continued to play a major role in the classical period particularly in the Mediterranean and among many of the lower classes in China. While there was great variety in specifics, most polytheistic religions attributed important roles to goddesses as well as gods. Goddesses were often sources of fertility, of beauty, but they could also exercise great power in many domains. Stories and plays illustrated how goddesses as well as gods could strongly influence human affairs. Women could also serve major roles as priestesses: this was true both in Egypt and Greece, where a few women gained special training and exercised important ritual functions. In Rome, a few women – the Vestal Virgins – could serve a goddess; after thirty years they could retire with a generous pensions and ongoing prestige, and were allowed to marry though few did so. Hinduism, though a more complex religion, offered similar features: powerful goddesses and a strong emphasis on the female as source of creative energy, and at least some spiritual roles for women as gurus, or spiritual teachers. And Hindu wives and mothers carried out important ritual functions in the household. In traditional Judaism, however, the female role was cut back. A single, powerful God was

often seen in masculine terms; serious religious scholarship was reserved for men, and women worshipped separately. With this exception, however, religion might have provided some balance to patriarchal conditions in many of the ancient and classical civilizations.

Study questions

1. How did laws in the early and classical civilizations seek to enforce male power over women? Were there any significant limitations to this power?
2. What were some important ways in which classical societies cannot be described simply in terms of male control over women?
3. What were some key differences in gender patterns in the major ancient and classical civilizations? Were they very significant?
4. How did religion factor into gender patterns in the early and classical civilizations? Did they offer a major modification of gender inequality?

Further reading

Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (2nd ed., Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

Barbara Ramusack and Sharon Sievers, *Women in Asia: restoring women in history* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: women in classical antiquity* (rev. ed., London: Pimlico, 1994).

Leona Anderson and Pamela Young, eds., *Women and Religious Traditions* (Oxford" Oxford University Press, 2003).