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(Statue of a female worshipper from Mesopotamia)

Gender Structure in Early Complex Societies

Mesopotamia

Marriages were arranged for women by their parents. The husband served as authority over his wife and children as he did over his slaves. There was a double standard.

- Adultery by a wife was punishable by death.
- Adultery by a husband was somewhat tolerated and even sometimes accepted.

The practice of veiling women probably arrived with Semetic nomads who came to Mesopotamia in ca. 3500 B.C.E. They felt that the veil emphasized the modesty of women, a concept that was adopted by later groups, including the Arabs when they spread into the area in the 7th century C.E. The Assyrians were the first to impose a veil on respectable women in public by law.

Source: Assyrian Law, Mesopotamia, 1381-1000 B.C.E.

Neither wives of lords, nor widows, nor Assyrian women who go out on the street may have their heads uncovered.....when they go out on the street alone, they must veil themselves.

The role of Mesopotamian women was strictly defined, most often as the daughter of her father or the wife of her husband. Most girls were trained for traditional roles of wife, mother, housekeeper, and if a woman had an occupation, it grew out of her household tasks.

- Beer brewer / tavern keeper
- Midwife / healer / herbalist

A large portion of Mesopotamian Law concerned the importance of protecting females but clearly emphasized limits and inferiority.

Source: Code of Hammurabi, Babylon, 900-612 B.C.E.

209. If a man strike a free-born woman so that she lose her unborn child, he shall pay ten shekels for her loss.
210. If the woman die, his daughter shall be put to death.
211. If a woman of the free class lose her child by a blow, he shall pay five shekels in money.
212. If this woman die, he shall pay half a mina.

Other Early Complex Societies

Distinctions between men and women in Egypt were based on differences in social classes rather than on gender differences. Equal economic and legal rights appear to have been given to both men and women, including

- Managing and disposing of property.
- Administering property independently.
- Receiving and keeping an inheritance.
- Signing contracts enforceable in the courts.



(Egyptian women, papyrus)

- Testifying in court cases.

Egyptian women were free to go out in public unveiled, and while they typically had traditional roles related to the family and household, there is evidence of women judges, magistrates, & doctors.

Jewish law traced descendents from mothers rather than fathers, though women were separated and inferior in worship.

In Shang China women had important roles outside of the home. There is evidence of women warriors, but this had declined by Classical era, ca. 600 B.C.E.

The Indus Valley had female goddesses, which is interpreted as there being some level of respect for women.

Why was Patriarchal Societies so pervasive in early complex societies?

As agriculture improved with better techniques, women’s labor became less important than in hunting/gathering societies. Gender inequality was more common in upper classes because in peasant families the work of women was essential for the family to survive. Among the upper classes, which had property, it was essential for a man to know who is heirs were in order to insure that land and possessions were inherited by an actual relative.

Nonetheless, women were not without indirect and informal powers. Women often wielded informal power by their emotional hold over husbands/sons. Most societies argued for decent treatment of women even as they denied women legal rights. Older women had power over daughters/ daughter-in-laws and servant women.



(Statue of goddess, Indus river valley)

Keep in Mind

- Patriarchy was a common theme in agricultural societies.
- Women’s options severely constrained, more so for upper class women than for peasants.
- Cultural systems supported and maintained gender inequality, often through religion and belief systems, as well as norms of behavior.
- The cultural systems meant that girls were reared to accept this order, while boys were reared to be conscious of their superiority.
- Laws that regulated the social order also regulated the gender structure of societies – veiling, property rights, punishments for adultery, for example.
- In many societies, when there was a need to control population, for example during a prolonged period of epidemic disease, or several seasons of poor harvest, the common practice was female infanticide.