

Throughout written history, women have experienced status subservient to the men they lived with. Generally, most cultures known to modern historians followed a standard pattern of males assigned the role of protector and provider while women were assigned roles of domestic servitude. Scholars speculate endlessly at the cause: biology, religion, social custom. Nevertheless, the women were always subordinated to the men in their culture. Through their artwork, tomb inscriptions, and papyrus and leather scrolls, preserved in the dry, desert air, Ancient Egyptians left evidence for scholars suggesting that Egypt was once a peculiar exception to this pattern. Anthropological evidence suggests that unusual circumstances in Ancient Egyptian culture provided for women to be given equal status to their male counterparts: notably, matrilineal inheritance and emphasis on the joy of family life over maintaining ethnic purity.

Legally, women in Ancient Egypt held the same legal rights as men. A woman could own property and manage it as she saw fit. One example of this, the Inscription of Mes, provided scholars with proof that women could manage property, institute litigation, and could act as a witness before a court of law. Surviving court documents not only showed that women were free to take action with the court, but the documents also show that they frequently won their cases. They could also enter contracts and travel freely, unescorted, throughout the state. This is a great contrast to women in Greece, who were required to act through a male representative. Interestingly, property and its administration was passed from mother to daughter, matrilineally. The Egyptians relied on matrilineal heritage, based on the assumption that maternal ancestors are less disputable than paternal ones. The effect of legal equality in writing and practice coupled with the ownership and administration of property led to an ensured equality.

The rights and egalitarian conditions enjoyed by Egyptian women shocked the conquering Greeks. In 450 BC, Greek historian Herodotus noted:

They Egyptians, in their manners and customs, seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. For instance, women attend market and are employed in trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving. Athenian Democracy mandated that the female's role in the domestic economy was the production of heirs and service of the family. The Egyptian state took no direct part in either marriage nor divorce and made no efforts to regulate the family. The purpose of the Egyptian family was apparently not the production of heirs for the patriarchal head of household, but the shared life and the pleasures and comfort it had to offer.

The legal subjugation of women in other societies seems to have been designed to ensure that women were denied sexual freedom to prevent them from indiscriminate breeding. Often, this was a direct result of the need to provide a pure ruling elite and to restrict the dispersal of family assets within a caste. The unique position of the god-king and the absence of a strictly defined "citizen" class made similar considerations irrelevant in Egypt. Modern Scholars are thoroughly aware that Egypt was greatly mixed, racially, and that no written evidence exists of racial tensions or bias. This was most likely the cause of lax sexual restrictions. The Egyptians simply did not care about maintaining racial purity.

With the exception of the Pharaoh, all marriages were monogamous and women had the right to arrange the terms of the marriage contract. Realistically, marriages were not polygamous. Many records survive of men raising children born to them of the household servants. Social stigma against married men having affairs was mild, yet married women were socially obligated to be faithful to their husbands. Unlike most societies, however, men having sex with married women were persecuted more severely than their partners.

Egyptian Art tells us the primarily of the women in the upper castes. Grave murals and reliefs depict wives standing next to their husbands. Archaeologists have yet to discover any evidence of domestic constriction. Daughters and Wives were free to live independently of male dominance of influence. It is believed from various murals, however, that women were also "put on a pedestal" by their

culture. Egyptian art was reflective of their conservative culture where art was Artistic convention of Egyptian and Aegean art depicts women as fairer skinned than their male companions. Generally, art historians have concluded that this was a both and artistic convention expressing the social ideals of the vigorous male with a more refined female and representation of the fact that women were often relieved of working out in the hot, Egyptian sun.

Unfortunately, the privilege of Ancient Egyptian women does not constitute the modern connotation of true freedom. Women were officially denied positions of public office although surviving records indicated that many women held low-profile positions during time of need in Middle Kingdom. Also, positions in business and government were patrilineally passed from father to son because of the domestic role expected of the woman. The population of Ancient Egypt was frequently in decline due to disease and periodic famines. The life expectancy for the average Egyptian was a little higher than 40 years. Such a low life-expectancy coupled with a high infant mortality rate ingrained a notion of the transience of life in the mind of the Egyptian. Childbirth was such a national priority that Pharaohs, such as Akhenaton, began representing scenes of their domestic life as acts of royal propaganda to increase the birth rate (Tansey, 91)

Fertility was a prime obsession in the Ancient Egyptian mind. A fertile woman was a successful woman. The low life-expectancy and mortality rate for pregnancies made childbearing the most attractive trait a woman could offer. However, unlike their Greek and Roman successors, the Egyptians conceived children for the joys of parenthood, not the continuity of male lineage. The expectant mother was greeted with desire from men and envy from other women. Upon proving her fertility, the Egyptian also enjoyed an elevation in status to the highly esteemed level of "mother." Mothers had an important and respected role within the family, and were frequently represented in positions of honor in the tombs of both their husband and sons. Parenthood is so stressed in Egyptian culture that parents would take the name of their eldest son (father/mother of....). Fertility obsession was equally stressed on the males. Ancient Egyptian men were sometimes known to commit suicide, rather than admit to being unable to conceive a child. Joyce Tyldesley expresses it best in her book , *Daughters of Isis*:

Both husband and wife appear to have loved their offspring dearly, and Egyptian men had no misplaced macho feelings that made them embarrassed or ashamed of showing affection towards their progeny. (Tyldesley, 47)
Understandably, not every Egyptologist shares Tyldesley's idealistic view of ancient Egyptian culture.

The reliability of surviving records from Ancient Egypt is frequently questioned by most Egyptologists. With such a complex writing system, the majority of the population was illiterate. All presently discovered surviving scrolls were written by professional male scribes. While the legal documents accurately reflect the legal status of women, the more personal writing and historical documents are more likely to carry a male-bias. Much of the poetry and musical lyrics describe women as lustful, loyal, yet beautiful. They often reflect male fantasies of helplessly love-stricken beauties and are only marginally used to build an understanding of the Egyptian culture. Egyptian secular literature typically views women in a less positive light. Written for an all-male audience, women play secondary or antagonistic parts to a male hero in every surviving tale but one. The one exception involves a helpless man continuously saved by his wife's swift thinking. Mythological literature, considering the greater expanse of its audience, portrays women in a more egalitarian light. Collected Egyptian mythology, with a greater variety of characters than Greek and Roman combined, portrays many goddesses in every role imaginable. The most popular goddess, Isis, personified the ideal wife and mother in her never-ending love for her family and resourcefulness in protecting her son from her husband's murderer. Contemporary Christian iconography is believed to be derived from images of Isis, holding her son, Horus, in her lap.

In conclusion, the woman of Ancient Egypt held rights and maintained liberties enviable to many women today. Legal equality and land ownership gave

women political power and financial independence while the devastation of disease and high mortality rates made motherhood a respected and appreciated institution. Domestic subjugation was avoided by the absence of a notion of racial purity, freeing the woman's sexuality and preventing external interference of the family. Although few of the records left are accurate enough to give us an undisputable perception of Ancient Egyptian culture, historians generally agree that the Egyptian woman had much more freedom than her contemporaries. The necessity for children looked many women in full-time motherhood, yet records indicated that they were appreciated for the happiness they brought to the home and the children they brought into the family. The study of Ancient Egypt takes relevance today in modern life because it provides suggestions towards the origins of modern patriarchy by providing scholars with an examples of conditions that brought about a particularly benign development of male-dominance in Ancient Egypt.

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