

## GENERAL IMAGE OF WOMAN AND HER STATUS IN VARIOUS SOCIETIES OF PAST AND PRESENT WITH REFERENCE TO JAPAN

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Irrespective of changes in the social role of women throughout the ages and countless varieties on this theme in diverse cultures, woman's status still largely depends in the biological fact that she is potentially the bearer of children, whose care, at least in infancy, is usually her responsibility. One might be inclined to believe that tenderness towards babies, the love and care for young children, and the desire to help the weak and sick, are innate feminine personality traits.

Every society, however primitive, has a social organization i.e. a system by which the tasks necessary for its continuing existence are distributed among its members. Division of labour forms the basis of a social stratification, which in its simplest form assigns roles according to the physical distinctions of sex, age and kinship. Men and women, the young and old, and the various members of an extended family not only have to fulfill functions considered appropriate to their respective status, but each has a clearly identifiable position in relation to others within the general framework of the social system.

They have different rights and obligations and different behaviour patterns are expected of them and they conform to them because from the very beginning they have been taught the ways of their society.<sup>1</sup>

The two largest and most obvious groups within society, as a whole, are men and women. The traditional roles adopted by each of

these groups sprang originally from basic biological difference. Because of his greater muscular strength, primitive man became the collector or hunter of food. Woman, the bearer of children, took up the domestic duties as mother and house keeper. The belief grew that women were the weaker sex, and therefore in need of man's protection. It was widely conceded that women were physically frail, emotionally unstable, and mentally inferior to men.<sup>2</sup>

Over the centuries the male sex has offered varied realization for subordinating women, and much of it has rested upon the dubious assumption of women's inherent inferiority. Thus, because of weaker characteristics, woman has come to be called a 'Weaker sex' or a 'fair sex'. History of man's existence on earth can rightly be called the history of man's domination and his assertion of authority and superiority over woman. The biological inequality has put man in a superior position and the woman in a subordinate one.

### **THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN VARIOUS SOCIETIES OF PAST AND PRESENT**

Throughout the ages various periods and societies have been greatly influenced or even dominated by individual women such as Elizabeth I of England and Catharine of the Great Russia. However, these instances have been the exception rather than the rule. It is generally conceded that women's social and legal rights or privileges have been limited until recent times. In the fertile river valleys of the Nile and of Asia Minor, some large empires, based on agriculture and trade, grew up and developed complex civilizations many centuries before Christ. In Babylonia, Egypt, Phrygia and Phoenicia, mother goddesses were worshipped as powerful deities. Under different names (Ishtar in Babylonia, Isis in Egypt), each of these deities personified the same principle: creation of life, destruction of evil forces, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Both in Babylonia and in Egypt, women enjoyed considerable independence and high status, Hammurabi the king of Babylon (during the first or second half of the 18th century B.C.) granted married women a great deal of financial and personal freedom. The bride price paid by the bridegroom, who may have included real estate, remained her property. Marriage was monogamous, if a wife decided to return to her father or was divorced by her husband; she took her dowry with her. A woman could divorce her husband on the grounds of cruelty and adultery. The children remained in the custody of their mother, who must usually be given adequate means to support them. Women could trade on their own account, independent of their husbands.<sup>4</sup>

In ancient Egypt, the status of women was higher still. They owned property, worked in many sectors of economy, took part in public life, and mixed freely with men. It has even been asserted that the social roles of men and women in Egypt were reversed i.e. women being the dominant sex. It certainly is a well known fact that the country was ruled by many queens.<sup>5</sup>

From the free and dignified position, the status of women in Athens had degenerated to that of child bearing slaves. Wives were secluded in their homes, had no education and few rights, and were considered by their husbands no better than cattles.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to Athens, women in militarist Sparta, enjoyed near equality with men, mixing freely with them in public and in sports events, including joint wrestling between men and women; they had a voice in politics and public affairs and were remarkably free from modesty.

In ancient Rome, a woman's legal position was one of complete subordination, first to the power of her father or brother and later to that of her husband. "In the eye of the law women were



regarded as imbeciles”,<sup>7</sup> or it can be said that women in ancient Greece and Rome were deemed inferior creatures and their subordinate status reflected it; at one time the Roman father and husband held practically, life and death power over both his wife and children.

In most of the ancient societies men controlled the family group. Just as the Roman and Greek families were strongly patriarchal, so was the Indian family of the Vedic times. The father was its sole master. His wife, children and slaves had no property of their own and could hardly speak of the free disposition of themselves.

## EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Christianity did not improve much the social status of women. Although women were credited equal to men in the eyes of God, they were regarded as temptresses, responsible for the fall of Adam, and as second class human beings, for as St. Paul wrote, A man ought not to cover his head, since his is the image and glory of God, but the woman is glory of man.<sup>8</sup>

Women were excluded from all public affairs. “The women should keep silence in the churches for they are not permitted to speak”<sup>9</sup>. The asterism of the early Church Fathers, especially St. Paul, affected the status of women for centuries.

In the middle ages, the church however, performed a very useful, social and economic function for women by providing shelter, occupation and dignified existence in nunneries for the many surplus women who had no hope of male support owing to numerous wars, crusades, pestilences, and the celibacy of monks and the clergy. Some of these women administered large estates and achieved considerable power. With the growth of towns, middle

class women played an increasing part in trade and were admitted to membership in many guilds. Their social as well as economic position was thereby considerably enhanced. Literacy, too, though mainly confined to the upper classes, appears to have been more wide spread among women than among men.<sup>10</sup>

## THE 19TH CENTURY

The era during which the most decisive and irreversible changes in the status of women occurred was the 19th century, and the circumstances which got them slowly underway were the technical, economic, and social upheavals known as the Industrial Revolution. Its impact on the lives of women was profound.

The transfer of production from home to factory, while sharply increasing the productivity of labour, destroyed the family as an economic unit. Henceforth, many thousands of men, women and even children living in industrial slums in big cities left their homes to work in factories and mines. Many women of the new industrial proletariat worked in appalling conditions of near starvation and unlimited working hours under a system of exploitation that became notorious as "Sweated labour", while they also gave birth to one child after another.

At the other end of the social spectrum the growing and prosperous middle class put a premium on the idleness of their women. Apart from child bearing and presiding over a well-ordered household, a bourgeois woman's main function was that of being an ornament to society and a status symbol for her husband. Chastity and sense of property were her highest virtues.<sup>11</sup>

Somewhere between the upper class social reformer and the female proletariat there was a third category of women, who slowly but in ever increasing numbers entered the labour market, namely,

clerical works. These women were of mixed social origin and came mostly from the poor and distressed families. They did not oust men from their jobs but entered a new type of employment, created by such technical inventions, as the telephone, the telegraph, and the typewriter. They also worked in post offices, banks etc, and it was assumed that at the same or lower wages one could engage young women of much superior quality in comparison with men.<sup>12</sup>

The changes that are currently taking place in the status and role of women everywhere, are mainly because of changing family patterns or else as a development towards greater equality of the sexes in political rights, access to education, and employment opportunities i.e. women's emancipation in short.

The two aspects, women's roles in family and in community, are closely interrelated; change in one sphere normally produces change in the other. Women's status, both in the family and society has been and is being radically altered by a combination of scientific and technological advances, growing industrialization, ensuing changes in the economic and social structure, and the spread of new ideologies.

The revolutions in the family patterns and in the social and political position of women are not equally far advanced, just as industrialization and urbanization are not equally developed, in all parts of the world. Even among the industrially highly developed countries, there are variations in the status of women, owing to different historical traditions, social customs, class distinction, religious affiliations and other factors.<sup>13</sup>

Like wise in Japan, the general situation of Japanese women has been altered radically, with ongoing changes in laws and society after Japan's defeat in the second world war, Japan's democratic constitution of 1946 marked a major step toward equal opportunity



for women, which has been further promoted by Japan's phenomenal economic development since the later half of the 1950's.

The attitudes towards Japanese women have undergone major changes in recent years, but traditional views retain a strong hold. As a consequence, women's attitudes are characterized by the co-existence of a diversity of views. Women themselves represent a broad spectrum, including career women and full time house-wives, independent types and dependent types.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the role of women in Japanese history. A young girl growing up in Japan today will enter a society in a state of change and flex.

Women in Japan have gained a new self-confidence and a new assertiveness from winning changes in reluctant institutions. Basic conditions of life have changed. Women have more time free from child bearing and house work because they could expect to live close to three quarters of a century. They could look forward to a longer life after bearing and raising children. Family planning has enabled women to determine the number and spacing of children, thus affording them more time for other activities. Because of technological developments in labour – saving devices, they could attend to house hold work in less time.<sup>15</sup>

New attitudes are particularly evident among young women who are marrying later, having fewer children, and insisting on full partnership.

The socio-economic changes in present day Japan have greatly altered the lives of women.

Since World War II the role of women around the world has changed, advances have been made in many nations in the fields of political and legal rights, job security, vocational training, health and education. Rationalizations about the physical and intellectual inferiority of women no longer have the same credence that they once had. The long struggle for equal status for women has brought them right to vote, property rights, and equality in civil status before the courts.

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