

Women and opportunity in colonial america essay sample

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Providing a true measure of equality for men and women has proven to be problematic throughout history. The differences in the two gender roles have been based, to some extent, on the different roles that they both bring to the nuclear family. Women who chose to have children as part of their family are making a decision that will affect their personal and professional opportunities in ways that do not affect the men involved, and during the course of history, this difference has served to define many of the traditional roles for women and men. During the Colonial era, which has been described as a time of opportunity for women, there were several unique factors involved; however, the truth of this statement varies widely, depending on whether you were a married woman, a single woman, or an African-American woman of any marital status. Indeed, there was only as much opportunity for women as there was need for the products of their labor to create goods and services for the Colonial market.

The fact that there were far fewer women than men during the Colonial era is commonly known. Because heading across the Atlantic Ocean was an adventure that many more single men took on than did heads of household, there just weren't as many women for the men to meet when they got to the colonies. This was helpful for single women in a number of ways; first of all, they had their pick when it came to choosing a marriage partner. Whether they were looking for true love, a wealthy lifestyle, or both, they would have had many suitors calling on them. Of course, the likelihood of a stable, wealthy lifestyle was not as easy to find in the colonies as it had been in Europe, but many women had more choices as far as marital partners in the colonies than they would have back in the old countries. For women who

remained single, there were also many more economic opportunities than there would have been in Europe. This was not because people in the colonies were more progressive than their counterparts back across the Atlantic, however; every able-bodied worker was needed in the colonies. If you combine this with a Puritan work ethic that equated laziness with mortal sin, then it is no wonder that “ life in an underdeveloped country made it absolutely necessary that each member of the community perform an economic function”(Lerner). Whether you were an established spinster, a widow, or a younger girl old enough for work who had not yet married, you were expected to be able to support yourself. Indeed, many Puritan towns gave plots of land to their single women who needed a way to support themselves, so that land would not go to waste. For the colonies to grow and thrive, every arable acre of land needed to be cultivated and to produce crops for consumption.

Other professions besides agriculture were open to women during the colonial era. In a stark contrast with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when women could only expect employment in nursing, education or office functions, many different jobs were available to single women. They ran butcher shops, made guns, crafter silver items, and covered furniture. They mixed medicines, delivered babies, wrote news articles and even ran taverns and boarding houses (Lerner). The demand for workers in colonial times was too immense for the social prejudices against working women to hold sway, and women poured into the openings, establishing themselves as a major force in labor in the late 1700's and early 1800's.

While married women had some of the same traditional roles in Colonial America that they had to fulfill in Europe, there were some crucial differences that made life in the colonies more equitable. First of all, many married women continued the same economic activities they had begun as single women; their husbands also worked, because the economic conditions of the day made it necessary for both adults to be working productively. However, there were also differences in the law that made marriage less of a financial trap for women. In the colonies, a dowry was unheard of. The families that had arrived from Europe were not established enough to give away land or other forms of property - they were scraping by to cultivate it themselves, in many cases. Also, in Europe, the husband owned all of his wife's property, by law. In the colonies, the wife had more control over what she had brought to the marriage - in large part because she had had more opportunities to earn possessions and money on her own. Finally, British common law dictated that women could not sign legal contracts without the consent of their husbands. However, in the colonies, women could sign contracts after marrying - and the pre-nuptial contract was born during this time period, securing women's rights to their property should the marriage fail (Lerner). These freedoms were very unusual for their time - anywhere in the world.

Before we go ahead and brand Colonial America the most progressive region on earth, though, we must turn our attention to the plight of African women who had been brought to America during the colonial period. The vast majority of these women came to the country imprisoned in the vast hold of

a slave ship, part of the “ triangle trade” that sent humans, sugar and molasses as three commodities around the Atlantic Ocean. In Africa, these women had been allowed to marry, bear children and contribute to family life. Coming to America, though, was not the dream of freedom that it was for Europeans. They were torn from their spouses and sold as property. Their owners used them for labor and, occasionally, for sexual purposes as well. Owners had to give permission for slaves to marry; if the slaves had children, those children were the property of the owner as well.

While the Colonial era may have seen some liberalization in the status of European women, for women of African descent, that liberalization would not come until 1863 – the year of the Emancipation Proclamation – and would not take its full form until the Civil Rights Act in the 1960’s.

Works Cited.

Lerner, Gerda. “ The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson.” *American Studies*, 1969. Web. Retrieved 27 October 2011 at <https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/amerstud/article/viewFile/2145/2104>