

The roles of women in ancient mesopotamia, china and egypt



In this paper, you'll read about three societies regarding the roles and positions women played in ancient times. Those societies are, Mesopotamia, China, and Egypt. Knowledge about the vital roles women played during ancient civilizations has been limited, but research has shown a variety of ways in which women contributed to ancient cultures and they were able to make their influences known in these societies. Although these women from these societies were similar in many ways, they were also different in some ways.

In some societies, women did not have the same rights as their men and were very limited to public life. For some, the only way they would have had equal rights to those of men is if they were women with high status, such as priestesses or royal family members. Whereas in other societies, women openly participated in the public life and were not as heavily restricted. There were laws that protected as well as laws that restricted women in these societies. Ancient Mesopotamian. Mesopotamian women lived in a Patriarchal society, which means the adult men of their society were vested authority over public and private affairs without the input of the women. The Mesopotamian women roles were defined and were placed under the authority of their fathers and husbands.

To satisfy their debts, some husbands and fathers sold their daughters and wives as slaves. Despite their inferior legal statuses, some women made their influence felt in the Mesopotamian society. Some were in the position to give advice to kings and their governments. They rarely acted as individuals in the public life and the ones that did were usually from royal families or wives of men who held status and power. Their marriages were

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arranged and they had to be virgins at the time of marriage. Their social and sexual behaviors were controlled by the Mesopotamian men.

Married women were forbidden to casually socialize with other men outside of their homes and were made to wear veils when venturing outside of their homes to discourage attention of men from outside of their households by 1500 B. C. E or earlier.

From childhood, most girls were trained for the traditional roles of being a wife, a mother, and a housekeeper. They learned how to cook and make beverages, grind grain, and spin and weave cloths. Very few were formally educated and were able to obtain work outside of the home as scribes – literate individuals who prepared administrative and legal documents for government and private parties.

The women also pursued careers as midwives, shopkeepers, brewers, bakers, tavern keepers, and textile manufacturers. Even though they were under the authority of Mesopotamian men, Hammurabis Laws on family relationships was put in place, some of which protected the women against unjust treatment by their husbands and other men. According to Hammurabis law, women who committed adultery were subjected to death by drowning to protect the reputation of their husband and the legitimacy of their children. The protect a woman from leaving her husbands house empty-handed, the law also states that if a man wish to separate from a woman who has borne him children, or from his wife who has borne him children: then he shall give that wife her dowry, and a part of the usufruct of field, garden, and property, so that she can rear her children. When she has

brought up her children, a portion of all that is given to the children, equal as that of one son, shall be given to her.

She may then marry the man of her heart (#137). The law also restricted women from having extra marital affairs and deserting her husband and family. If a mans wife, who lives in his house, wishes to leave it, plunges into debt, tries to ruin her house, neglects her husband, and is judicially convicted: if her husband offers her release, she may go on her way, and he gives her nothing as a gift of release.

If her husband does not wish to release her, and if he takes another wife, she shall remain as servant in her husbands house (#141). If a woman quarrel with her husband, and say: “ You are not congenial to me,” the reasons for her prejudice must be presented. If she is guiltless, and there is no fault on her part, but he leaves and neglects her, then no guilt attaches to this woman, she shall take her dowry and go back to her fathers house (#142). Ancient China Womens roles were to look after the men in their families per Confucius. Majority of the women living in ancient China lived oppressed lives.

Even though life was a lot easier for women with high statuses or from the imperial families, they too were subjected to the oppression. Women were considered secondary to men and were treated that way most of their lives.

HUMILITY On the third day after the birth of a girl the ancients observed three customs: first to place the baby below the bed; second to give her a potsherd [a piece of broken pottery] with which to play; and third to announce her birth to her ancestors by an offering. Now to lay the baby

below the bed plainly indicated that she is lowly and weak, and should regard it as her primary duty to humble herself before others. To give her potsherds with which to play indubitably signified that she should practice labor and consider it her primary duty to be industrious. To announce her birth before her ancestors clearly meant that she ought to esteem as her primary duty the continuation of the observance of worship in the home. These three ancient customs epitomize womans ordinary way of life and the teachings of the traditional ceremonial rites and regulatons. Let a woman modestly yield to others; let her respect others; let her put others first, herself last.

Should she do something good, let her not mention it; should she do something bad let her not deny it. Let her bear disgrace; let her even endure when others speak or do evil to her. Always let her seem to tremble and to fear.

When a woman follows such maxims as these then she may be said to humble herself before others. Let a woman retire late to bed, but rise early to duties; let her nor dread tasks by day or by night. Let her not refuse to perform domestic duties whether easy or difficult. That which must be done, let her finish completely, tidily, and systematically, When a woman follows such rules as these, then she may be said to be industrious.

Let a woman be correct in manner and upright in character in order to serve her husband. Let her live in purity and quietness of spirit, and attend to her own affairs. Let her love not gossip and silly laughter. Let her cleanse and purify and arrange in order the wine and the food for the offerings to the

ancestors. When a woman observes such principles as these, then she may be said to continue ancestral worship. No woman who observes these three fundamentals of life has ever had a bad reputation or has fallen into disgrace.

If a woman fail to observe them, how can her name be honored; how can she but bring disgrace upon herself

HUSBAND AND WIFE

The Way of husband and wife is intimately connected with Yin and Yang [these are the two basis elements of the Universe: Yin, the soft yielding feminine element, and Yang the hard aggressive male element. Every substance contains both elements in varying proportions]. and relates the individual to gods and ancestors. Truly it is the great principle of Heaven and Earth, and the great basis of human relationships. Therefore the “ Rites” [The Classic of Rites] honor union of man and woman; and in the “ Book of Poetry” [The Classic of Odes] the “ First Ode” manifest the principle of marriage. For these reasons the relationships cannot but be an important one. If a husband be unworthy, then he possesses nothing by which to control his wife. If a wife be unworthy, then she possesses nothing with which to serve her husband.

If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of conduct manifesting his authority are abandoned and broken. If a wife does not serve her husband, when the proper relationship between men and women and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed. As a matter of fact the purpose of these two [the controlling of women by men, and the serving of men by women] is the same. Now examine the gentlemen of the present age. They only know that wives must be controlled, and that the husbands

rules of conduct manifesting his authority must be established. They therefore teach their boys to read books and study histories.

But they do not in the least understand that husbands and masters must also be served, and that the proper relationship and the rites should be maintained. Yet only to teach men and not to teach women — is that not ignoring the essential relation between them According to the “ Rites,” it is the rule to begin to teach children to read at the age of eight years, and by the age of fifteen years they ought then to be ready for cultural training. Only why should it not be that girls education as well as boys be according to this principle RESPECT AND CAUTION As Yin and Yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of the Yang is rigidity; the function of the Yin is yielding. Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness.

Hence there arose the common saying: “ A man though born like a wolf may, it is feared, become a weak monstrosity; a woman though born like a mouse may, it is feared, become a tiger.” Now For self-culture nothing equals respect for others. To counteract firmness nothing equals compliance.

Consequently it can be said that the Way of respect and acquiescence is womans most important principle of conduct. So respect may be defined as nothing other than holding on to that which is permanent; and acquiescence nothing other than being liberal and generous. Those who are steadfast in devotion know that they should stay in their proper places; those who are liberal and generous esteem others, and honor and serve them.

If husband and wife have the habit of staying together, never leaving one another, and following each other around within the limited space of their own rooms, then they will lust after and take liberties with one another. From such action improper language will arise between the two. This kind of discussion may lead to licentiousness. But of licentiousness will be born a heart of disrespect to the husband. Such a result comes from not knowing that one should stay in one's proper place. Furthermore, affairs may be either crooked or straight; words may be either right or wrong. Straightforwardness cannot but lead to quarreling; crookedness cannot but lead to accusation.

If there are really accusations and quarrels, then undoubtedly there will be angry affairs. Such a result comes from not esteeming others, and not honoring and serving them. If wives suppress not contempt for husbands, then it follows that such wives rebuke and scold their husbands. If husbands stop not short of anger, then they are certain to beat their wives. The correct relationship between husband and wife is based upon harmony and intimacy, and conjugal love is grounded in proper union. Should actual blows be dealt, how could matrimonial relationship be preserved? Should sharp words be spoken, how could conjugal love exist? If love and proper relationship both be destroyed, then husband and wife are divided.

WOMANLY QUALIFICATIONS

A woman ought to have four qualifications: (1) womanly virtue; (2) womanly words; (3) womanly bearing; and (4) womanly work.

Now what is called womanly virtue need not be brilliant ability, exceptionally different from others. Womanly words need be neither clever in debate nor keen in conversation. Womanly appearance requires neither a pretty nor a perfect face and form.

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Womanly work need not be work done more skillfully than that of others. To guard carefully her chastity; to control circumspectly her behavior; in every motion to exhibit modesty; and to model each act on the best usage, this is womanly virtue. To choose her words with care; to avoid vulgar language; to speak at appropriate times; and nor to weary others with much conversation, may be called the characteristics of womanly words. To wash and scrub filth away; to keep clothes and ornaments fresh and clean; to wash the head and bathe the body regularly, and to keep the person free from disgraceful filth, may be called the characteristics of womanly bearing. With whole-hearted devotion to sew and to weave; to love not gossip and silly laughter; in cleanliness and order to prepare the wine and food for serving guests, may be called the characteristics of womanly work. These four qualifications characterize the greatest virtue of a woman. No woman can afford to be without them.

In fact they are very easy to possess if a woman only treasure them in her heart. The ancients had a saying: “ If love is far off If desire love, then love is at hand!” So can it be said of these qualifications. IMPLICIT OBEDIENCE

Whenever the mother-in-law says, “ Do not do that,” and if what she says is right, unquestionably the daughter-in-law obeys. Whenever the mother-in-law says, “ Do that,” even if what she says is wrong, still the daughter-in-law submits unflinchingly to the command. Let a woman not act contrary to the wishes and the opinions of parents-in-law about right and wrong; let her not dispute with them what is straight and what is crooked. Such docility may be called obedience which sacrifices personal opinion. Therefore the ancient book, “ A Pattern for Women,” says: “ If a daughter-in-law who

follows the wishes of her parents-in-law is like and echo and shadow, how could she not be praised