

Gender roles in gender in world history book

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An Analysis of Peter Stearns Gender in World History

The media today is dominated by headlines about gender inequality in society as a whole, often cited as the fault of the generation before us. In fact, the issue of gender inequality spans for many millennia, with roots in early agricultural societies. Yet surprisingly, the human race was once relatively free of gender inequality in its nascent stages. One may wonder when this transition happened, and why. This is exactly the question that Peter Stearns answers in his book “ Gender in World History”. The first chapter, The Traditional Base, addresses this historical question by discussing several early river-valley civilizations and how each developed gender role assignment in mirrored fashion, but each developed their own intricacies over time. Although Stearns answer to the historical question of when societies began to form distinct gender inequality is effective with respect to evidence and persuasiveness and evidence, Stearns still falls short in detailing how relations with neighboring nomads could have affected each civilization’s gender role assignment.

Although early agricultural societies were isolated from one another, almost all adopted a social construct that encouraged women’s inequality. Stearns describes the value of surplus as “...the strength of surplus, small numbers of people could specialize in non-agricultural activities...”¹ The shift from a hunter gatherer society to an agricultural society entailed much more than remaining in one place for an extended period of time according to Stearns. This shift also allowed for specialization even the family. Since food could be produced for more than a person’s family, the excess could be sold.

Previously gathering sustenance was painstaking and required everyone to

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contribute. Childbearing was now a priority for women to raise children to help the men with field work. This specialization kept the women within the home and isolated from interaction with others. Women's isolation only allowed for the males to trade, interact and take prominent roles in society. Stearns makes it clear that this new gender specialization marks the transition from women having an active role in society to exclusively home-making duties and provides ample evidence to support these claims.

All of the agricultural societies that Stearns analyzes generally formed the same system of gender role assignments, but there were variations that Stearns fails to explain. These differences could be attributed to relationships with nomads. For example, Stearns mentions that in Egypt the Pharaoh could be female and traditions a male pharaoh would receive, a female could receive. Stearns readily mentions these details but does not mention the relationship they had with their nomadic neighbors. Egypt was a civilization that would contract nomadic tribes for labor, and even police forces to guard holy sites¹. Meanwhile the Romans had a very chaotic relationship with the raiding Etruscans², and Roman culture failed to permit a female emperor. A possible reason for this is that relationships with nomadic neighbors could have played a part of this cultural nuance. In nomadic societies women were treated with very little distinction from men, and communication between a nomadic society and a sedentary one could breed an acceptance of women in prominent societal roles. Stearns neglects to explain this nuance in governance.

Stearns persuasiveness throughout the first chapter of his book leaves little to argue with. Aside from his failure to mention reasons why certain

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civilizations were more accepting of women governance, Stearns does well linking each civilization to each other using specific evidence and comparisons. For example, when Stearns explains a major point in gender role assignment he uses similar practices in two different civilizations to prove that it was a universal trend. The example comparing the rise of Chinese foot binding and the veiling of women in the Middle East to show the universal shift towards treating women as property is effective to show that it was universal and managed to appear in two civilizations isolated from each other. Examples drawn from multiple independent sources help Stearns answer the historical question posed by giving him credibility to make persuasive assertions of his view point on gender role assignment in ancient agricultural civilizations.

Stearns tackles difficult questions of how gender inequality has developed, highlights the parallel development of gender roles in early agricultural civilizations with excellent evidence and argues how isolation allowed for unique systems to develop in each civilization, but falls short when explaining some possible underlying conditions influencing such shifts. The persuasiveness of this chapter is compelling, but could be enhanced by explaining why certain civilizations developed differently with respect to gender roles in society.