

Humanities



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HUMANITIES The Role of Women in Ancient Rome Although women never acquired the right to vote or hold public office, at least in the relatively democratic republican period they were able to develop increasing influence on decisions made by the male representatives of the governing body, the Forum. (Fant 1982) This was due to their greater wealth acquired by inheritances from their fathers and husbands, casualties of Rome's military adventures.

An example of how they were able to do this is as follows. The Rome government needed funds to pay for the unsuccessful war against Hannibal in 216 B. C. and noting their increasing wealth, decided to tax the military widows.(Fant 1982) Initially the women accepted this even though it was an obvious case of taxation without representation. However, by 195 B. C. this emergency was over and unlike the provinces, Rome refused to repeal this Oppian Law. Nevertheless, after a demonstration by thousands of affected women supported by sympathetic tribunes they did repeal it. Later in 42 B. C. again an attempt was made to impose similar taxation.(Letkowitz 1982)However, this time it was to pay for a civil war against a rebellious faction. Hortensia was the first female to speak at a Tribunal in the Forum, and was able to successfully argue that women should not be required to pay taxes to support killing of their husbands and fathers. and thereby significantly reduce the pool of women subject to the tax.

Aside from Hortensia, the Sabine women must be considered as icons of Ancient Rome (historylink102. com). In fact legend indicates that but for them the Roman Empire may not have ensued. Initially mainly men settled in this rough city, so Romulus devised a plan to attract women to grow Rome's population. He invited a nearby tribe, the Sabines to a festival inside the city, <https://assignbuster.com/humanities/>

where the men were attacked and many killed and the women abducted and raped. The surviving Sabine men later returned to Rome under King Titus to retrieve their women, but they were happy with their new lives in Rome and negotiated a truce with the Sabines and Romans uniting and sharing power in Rome for years to follow.

The Forum demonstrations illustrate how women even without legal powers were able to use their newly acquired economic leverage craved by the state to pressure it to enact policies more favorable to their interests. On an individual level, wives of high ranking officials, including the emperor, could also exert some influence, although sometimes as in the case of Agrippina, this could be for purely selfish, evil personal motives. (She engineered the ascendancy of Nero, her favorite son to the throne Thompson 2010). Public signs posted by women seeking votes for favored male candidates showed their interest in politics. (Mason 2011).

Occupationally initially women were restricted to roles of food preparation, textile making and of course prostitution.(text p. 151) Eventually they were also able to become musicians, painters, hairdressers, priestesses, midwives and even gladiators. Also the fathers and husbands at one time controlled all their property, but eventually they acquired some property rights and at least the upper class women could open their own businesses.(text p. 151) As they were charged with the responsibility of educating and inculcating Roman culture to their sons, they were allowed to acquire some limited knowledge for this purpose (Mason 2011) In fact the primary role of women, especially in the upper class, was to produce male heirs(Mason 2011) Failure to do so was grounds for divorce, and female offspring were often exposed, that is, cruelly abandoned to starve.

In conclusion, as in modern day strongly patriarchal societies such as Islamic republics like Saudi Arabia, women have very little legal power. However through organizing large scale feminist movements and leveraging economic and other power they may have, they can force reforms bringing about more real gender equality.

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