

Role of women in iroquois society history essay



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Women had crucial responsibilities in the Iroquois society. They play an important role in both the social and political activities of Iroquois life. Unlike many North American societies, that of the Iroquois were based on a matrilineal society, that is, kinship was traced through the female line. Any children born into the family belonged to their mother's family, not their father's, and they were educated by their mother's relatives. It was also a matrilocal society, meaning men moved in with the women and her relatives' household after marriage. However, women in this society has much more influence than line of kinship, they play major roles in economy, warfare, and politics.

Women had the advantage in terms of economic control. She had rights to property, both personal ownership rights and the right to dispose of personal possessions. The equipments used for cultivating soil, for arranging food, for dressing animals' skins, for making clothes, cooking utensils and other house-hold items also belonged to the women Furthermore, the women held possession of the land, the house, and all the harvest (The Role of Women in Iroquois Culture, 2003). The Iroquois society did not operate in a structure where land could be bought and sold. In their system the land was held communally by all the women. So, every woman owned a portion of land that was exclusively hers but if she was to desert that piece of land, other women were free to claim it and use it in any way she wishes. In the 15th century, The Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois Confederacy, stated that " women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil." The ownership rights that women had meant that they had economic power within the society (Murphy, 2001). Prior to contact with the

Europeans, there was equal sense of responsibility in terms of providing food within the two genders. Women were in charge of gathering vegetables, fruits, and grains while the men were the providers of meat and fish.

However, with increasing European contact, the task of women being the food provider increased significantly. It became possible for Indians to exchange beaver furs for ammunitions with the Europeans, for this reason men's role shifted from providing fish and meat to trading beaver furs.

Moreover, after 1640 the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy (comprised of Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk) initiated series of wars against other tribes who are allied with the French due to conflicts of control over fur trade along the St. Lawrence River. This caused an even greater decrease in food production by men. The men were occupied with war parties and had no time for hunting, so this meant that women had to increase their cultivation to compensate for the men lack of food provision (Sultzman, n. d). Women then had the right to distribute food since the land that the food was cultivated was hers. This is important because stored food is considered to be one of the main forms of wealth for the Iroquois (Hughes, 1995). This additional task resulted in an even higher status for women since they held further control over the economic organization. When the women are a crucial factor in the tribal economy, her status is inclined to be high. According to Eileen Jenness, the author of " The Indian Tribes in Canada",

" If women among the Iroquois enjoyed more privileges and possessed greater freedom than the women of other tribes, this was due . . . to the important place that agriculture held in their economic life, and the

distribution of labour . . . which left the entire cultivation of fields and the acquisition of the greater part of the food supply to the women.” (Baskin, 1982)

The role of women in Iroquois society is not only limited to providing food. They play a vital part in politics as well. It was the female who appointed the chief in a meeting of the tribe’s respectful female leaders. It was also the responsibility of the women to ensure that new chiefs carried themselves adequately, once appointed and approved. If new chiefs behaved inappropriately, the female would warn him three times, giving him a chance to redeem himself. If after the three warnings, the chief did not modify his behavior, the female has the power to influence the council to remove him out of the position. Since, the female hold a great deal of power in appointing and deposing, it was essential for her to carry herself with great etiquette so if she had to reprimand the chiefs who conducted themselves poorly, her words would be respected and taken seriously. Even though, the women could not be chiefs themselves, their role with the chiefs’ selection and the ability to remove made them a main component in the political organization of the Iroquois society. Furthermore, women were encouraged to voice their opinion in the council. When any major decisions needed to be made, both men and women attended and discussed the options in meetings (Iroquois Women, 2001). Women also contributed in providing food for council meetings, she had the power to deny or present food for these meetings as she sees fit. Food was a major part of this society, as mentioned before food was a source of wealth, so it was important to keep the women content as so to make sure she does not withhold any food (Hughes, 1995).

Although, male chiefs were the public speakers, women were welcome to intervene and as property owners and protectors of their children, they often told chiefs what should be done. What usually happens is the women would select a male speaker to represent them and acknowledge their concerns in the meetings, this showed that the men valued and had high regards of women's opinions (Snow, 1994).

Lastly, but most importantly women were involved in warfare. When men had to go to war, it was the women who collected weapons, clothing, and other war items for the men and carried these belongings for the men during their first day of war journey. Before every war was waged, the Iroquois held war ceremonials and after the warriors changed their ceremonial war attire for clothing more appropriate for travelling and combating, the women returned to the village carrying the ceremonial goods and clothing (Baskin, 1982). For women, the main objective of war is to wait for war captives that would replace dead family members. This is known as the " Mourning War". Since there were so many death rates due to wars waged on other Indian tribes, women often lost their husbands or sons. To replace dead family members, war captive from other tribes are presented to Iroquois women. The Iroquois have options, either they vengefully tortured the prisoner to death or adopt him or her into the tribe. The women were ultimately the one to decide the fate of those captives that were brought in. Women war captives were also common because the tribes sometimes wanted women who were capable of childbearing. By maintaining the balance of the population and at times increasing it, labor shortage was never much of the problem. So, families would be economically comfortable. Furthermore, the

practice of mourning war meant that the Iroquois would be able to build a strong military force. As many as half of the Iroquois warriors had become members of tribes through this adoption system of mourning war. As the proportion of these warriors in a tribe grew, the power of women was inclined to increase (Sweeny & Haefeli, 2005).

Although, women in Iroquois family were not completely dominant, they certainly enjoyed a sense of equality and respect from men, which is more than what can be said about colonial women. Their impact on economic, warfare, and political organization has shaped the Iroquois society. In the nineteenth century when the Europeans arrives and relocated the Iroquois to reservations (mostly in Oklahoma and Canada), Iroquois society dramatically changed. Both men and women were forced to accept the heavily male dominant way of life. The European style of gaining inheritance through the male, property owned by men, and a government system with no women interference was foreign to the Iroquois. It was expected that under the circumstances women's role would change and decrease. Despite these drastic changes, the role of women in Iroquois society is not completely removed. They have not totally adopted American and Canadian standards and system and have maintained their own sense of culture. Moreover, with the growing interest of traditional culture of modern day Iroquois, there is a sense that women will still occupy an essential niche in the society. The role of women in Iroquois society inspired many female which led to feminist movement, namely famous nineteenth-century feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Jocelyn Gage (Kay, 2006).