

The Role of Women in Egypt

Ever since the beginning of time, woman was given a duty that she'll carry on performing until the end of days. And that primary duty was to gather food and crops from nearby and to bear children. On the contrary, man was out hunting for a living. In order to feed his wife and children. We clearly see that lives of our early ancestors were greatly dependent on the role of men and women, neither one could have made it without the aid of the other. But back then life was too simple, so was the formation of the society, if there was any, but by the passing of time it became more complicated and the circle of the family became much larger which caused the small independent family to evolve into a fully integrated society. Those changes caused an amendment in both roles of men and women, and the reality and form of dependence evolved over time.

Particularly in Egypt, females possessed land and had a great deal of economical freedom (Fiero 22-46), woman and men worked side by side in farms, if so equally. And it was very important for a Pharaoh to marry as many women in order to add as much land as possible to his own owning, where the more he owned the larger, the more effective his authority is.

Women also enjoyed other professions in the society but only came to power three times, but with no doubt, Hatshepsut was the most noticeable one of all three. She ruled for twenty-two years on the behalf of her nephew Thutmose III. But yet people in ancient Egypt did not appreciate the idea of a woman ruling. So soon after Thutmose III took over her traces were greatly dissipated. Contrariwise, a woman could not only be in power through pharaohship only, but also by happening to be a pharaoh's wife. As in the case of Nefertiti, the wife of Akhenaten, and her mother in law (Fiero 24).

They have dramatically influenced decision making at that time. "Make her happy while you are alive, for she is land profitable to her lord. Neither judge her nor raise her to a position of power...her eye is a stormwind when she sees." This was a manual that offered an advice to husbands concerning their wives, what it really says is that women are of great importance but at the same time they should not be qualified to be in power. Roaming around approximately the same time, in Mesopotamia a human being, generically, was valued and treated according to his status and wealth. And women in specific were considered inferior to men, Women were basically owned by their man, a woman would move from her father's house to her husbands (Fiero 50). But women, surprisingly, enjoyed a good deal of commercial freedom that she would engage in small business transactions.

There is written proof of female scribes, doctors and other important positions that women held throughout Egyptian history. But there weren't a great deal of these women who possessed these jobs. Opportunity for women to move up in social status on their own was totally restricted. Only people that were most suited for ruling would be allowed to govern the city. And since women were denied the education that men received, women were not "suited" for ruling. The "guardian class" as they were called, did indeed consist of both men and women. But the women had to behave according to the men, while the men were allowed to do as they pleased.

A woman's rank was her husband's, and she could not be ranked individually. Rank, rather than gender, was the factor that determined who was the head of the household. Therefore men didn't marry a women who was greater or richer than they, because then these women would be in charge and the heads of the households. Women in charge of men were socially unacceptable during this time frame.

What was it like to be an Ancient Egyptian woman? Did she worry about how she looked, about her weight, about the first appearance of wrinkles on her skin? Did she diet and compare her figure with her friends? Was she bothered about bad breath and stretch marks? Although her life predates modern women's by some thousands of years, it would seem that her preoccupations were very similar to our own. Historical research has uncovered ancient Egyptian formulae for many conditions of which the removal of stretch marks (particularly after pregnancy), the reduction of wrinkling, or the diminishing of scarring are only a few. Men, too, seem to have been concerned with their appearances, and there were also in circulation at that time recipes for facilitating hair growth and getting rid of bald spots.

Beauty and self-confidence were important to the ancient Egyptians. Art depicts men as slim, broad shouldered and muscular. Women are depicted as having rounded busts with small waists and flat stomachs. They hold themselves elegantly and wear fine clothing with luxurious hair and jewelry. The well-known adage "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" would have made sense to an ancient Egyptian woman, for good hygiene provided a solid foundation upon which beautifying rituals rested. Women who could afford it would have made a cleansing paste out of water combined with Natron, a compound which occurs naturally in sodium bicarbonate and sodium carbonate. Once she had washed, she would rub oils into her skin, possibly fragranced with frankincense or myrrh. Even a poorer woman would be supplied with oils as part of her wages. The importance of oiling the skin may in part be due not only to the particular skin qualities of Egyptian women but also to the fact that they lived in such a hot, arid climate.

Egyptian women loved to adorn themselves with make-up: malachite, a copper ore, was the basis of a green cosmetic used to adorn the eye, the color of which symbolized

fertility. Dark grey eye paint was also used and this was a derivative of a lead ore called Galena. Women attended not only to their bodies but also to their clothes. There are many examples of women being massaged with oils and dressed in fine linens, and garlanded with flowers in the art of the time. In their graves we find combs and hairpins. They thought thick hair was best and used hair extensions and wigs. They even dyed their hair and wigs a variety of colors with blues, greens, blondes and gold being the preferred color. For the average Egyptian woman life was short. Many girls became brides around the age of thirteen to young men who were often only a few years older. As sons would later take on the important responsibility for funerary preparations, securing comfort for deceased family members in the afterlife, they were highly desired.

Having many children was a sign of status, as well so that childbearing was considered to be a very important function of wedlock. Sadly, many mothers and their babies died during childbirth or shortly thereafter, so that it was common for many young women to die before their 21st birthdays. A middle class woman, on the other hand, who led a much more comfortable and well-nourished life, might live to the grand old age of thirty-five. The Greek domination of Egypt, which began with the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., did not sweep away Egyptian social and political institutions.

Both Egyptian and Greek systems of law and social traditions existed side-by-side in Egypt at that time. Greeks functioned within their system and Egyptians within theirs. Mixed parties of Greeks and Egyptians making contractual agreements or who were forced into court over legal disputes would choose which of the two legal systems they would use. Ironically, while the Egyptians were the subjugated people of their Greek rulers, Egyptian women, operating under the Egyptian system, had more privileges and civil rights than the

Greek women living in the same society, but who functioned under the more restrictive Greek social and legal system.

The Egyptian woman's rights extended to all the legally defined areas of society. From the bulk of the legal documents, we know that women could manage and dispose of private property, including: land, portable goods, servants, slaves, livestock, and money, as well as financial instruments. A woman could administer all her property independently and according to her free will. She could conclude any kind of legal settlement. She could appear as a contracting partner in a marriage contract or a divorce contract. She could execute testaments, she could free slaves, she could make adoptions, and she was entitled to sue at law. It is highly significant that a woman in Egypt could do all of the above and initiate litigation in court freely without the need of a male representative. This amount of freedom was at variance with that of the Greek woman who required a designated male, called a *kyrios*, to represent or stand for her in all legal contracts and proceedings. This male was usually her husband, father or brother. As the position in the hierarchy of a woman depended on the position of her father, it is obvious that a poor farmer woman couldn't reach the top of the society even if she was ambitious.

Pharaoh had several wives but only one gave birth to the heir and future pharaoh. All the women that have marked the Egyptian political life were daughters of Pharaohs. Even if the Pharaoh was the absolute ruler, the Queen could influence her husband's decisions. Nefertiti, Hatshepsut and Cleopatra are examples of queens that have exerted a great power in Egypt. Hatshepsut and Cleopatra ruled alone. Lots of stories were written about Cleopatra's beauty and charisma, she was a kind of sorceress who could easily have won your heart. Politically, she ruled with the help of her prime minister and she kept an eye on Greek

governors who were in control of other parts of the country. She had to cope with a delicate situation because Egypt had become a bureaucratic land filled with riots and the Egyptian money was suffering from severe devaluation.

Cleopatra becomes Queen of Egypt at the age of 18. She rapidly tries to solve the existing conflict with the Roman Empire. Two sons of the Roman consul had been murdered in Alexandria one year ago. Cleopatra's enemies were plotting and manage to throw her away from the throne. She was forced to leave the town. Her brother takes the power with the help of his councilors who helped him to plot against Cleopatra. The position of women in Egyptian society was unique in the ancient world. The Egyptian female enjoyed many the same legal and economic rights as the Egyptian male within the same social class. However, one private letter of the New Kingdom from a husband to his wife shows us that while a man could take his wife with him, as he moved up in rank, it would not have been unusual for such a man to divorce her and take a new wife more in keeping with his new and higher social status. Still, self-made women certainly did exist in Egypt. However, how their legal freedoms related to their status as defined by custom and folk tradition is more difficult to ascertain.

In general, social position in Egypt was based, not on gender, but on social rank. On the other hand, the ability to move through the social classes did exist for the Egyptians. Ideally, the same would have been true for all ancient women.

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