

## **The Status of Women in the Ancient World**

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The ancient world was known to be one of deathly warfare and disease, extravagant art, literature, and culture, as well as an era of empires, conquest and power. What society tends to fall ignorant to however, are the disadvantages and limitations of women who existed during that period—all of which are just as significant and memorable as the list above. Women in ancient western civilization were viewed as incapable of governing society, carrying out work/jobs, and marrying for themselves, compared to their male counterparts. Women were dominated by men in such patriarchal societies, which helped to transform the identities, status, and opportunities of such citizens in the Athenian, Roman, Greek, (and so forth) empires, as well as those who exist in modern-day society. In totality, throughout the history of western civilization, women have been disadvantaged in the realms of politics/the law, marriage, and labor, all of which have helped to influence the position of women in today's era.

Women in ancient history were very disadvantaged in the realms of politics and law, compared to the men of that era—despite their status or social class. This idea was first observed during the Athenian time period, in which women were considered “citizens who could participate in most religious cults and festivals but were otherwise excluded from public [and political] life” (Spielvogel, pg. 81). In other words, women were not given any power in decision making, voting, or holding government positions; their place in politics was equal to that of slaves. This pattern continued during the time of the Romans, in which most women were not permitted to attend, speak, or vote at political assemblies, and those upper-class women who did have some political power, were seen by society as rulers motivated by spite and jealousy (Cartwright). Additionally, these upper-class women were mostly influential of Rome's politics, when their husbands' lives depended on it; many were depended on to manage their husbands' estates and protect their political interests when men were called to serve (Cartwright). However, Roman women depended on their male relatives and husbands in law and finance matters. Research on ancient civilization shows that women were legally obliged to have a nominated male family member act in their interests. Such a rule was designed to keep property (especially inherited property) in the hands of the men of each family, again emphasizing the disadvantages women faced in both politics/law and a patriarchal society (Cartwright).

Withal, the Greeks of ancient western civilization also emphasize the small role/position women carried in politics/the law. During the classical period in Greece, women could not vote, own property, or sue another citizen; women were entirely dependent for men to perform these roles (“Politics”). Ultimately, women held no political rights as a citizen, and were as equally disadvantaged as slaves in that regard. Research shows that society focused more on political “freedom” than of “rights,” during that time. This idea of political and lawful freedom, dismissed a woman's right to vote, hold office, or inherit property—all of which males did not believe women had the ability to do. Furthermore, Greek women were chattel, and considered the property of some men; they did not have the right to divorce or make decisions regarding childbearing (“Politics”). In some cases, if a man could not get a woman pregnant, he would arrange another to do it for him, despite the health or condition of the woman (“Politics”). Such, implies how legally disadvantaged women were in comparison to men regarding both Greek law and politics.

Moreover, the inequality of women during the ancient times of western civilization is

most apparent in the realms of marriage. Beginning with the Hebrews, women were subject to male authority; wives were required to remain faithful to their husbands, while men were permitted to engage in sexual activities outside of their marriages (Spielvogel, pages 37-39). Such, was also a common pattern of marriages during the Italian Renaissance; marital relationships were seen more as formal ties than deep, emotional attachments which encouraged extramarital affairs for men (Spielvogel, page 336). Women who participated in sexual behaviors outside of their marriages, however, were severely punished and sometimes even executed. The disadvantages of being a woman in the realm of marriage is also demonstrated in Roman naming practices, in which male citizens were spoken to by three different names (praenomen, nomen, and cognomen) while women were all referred to the same feminine version of the family name (Cartwright). Such, emphasizes the subordinate and submissive position women were forced to take in marriage, given little to no voice or respect in ancient western civilization.

Women were also disadvantaged in comparison to men regarding first marriages and virginity. In ancient Rome, women were forced to marry and remarry at young ages in order to continue bearing large numbers of children, while maintaining family lines. For example, Tullia, Cicero's beloved daughter was "married at sixteen, widowed at twenty-two, remarried a year later, divorced at twenty-eight, remarried the year after, and divorced at thirty-three... she then died at thirty-four most likely due to early and consistent pregnancy complications" (Spielvogel, page 127). During this era, it was not unusual for high mortality rates of young females, suggesting that in marriage females were treated more as "machines" than lifetime partners. Moreover, in the Germanic Kingdoms, marriages were arranged by fathers and uncles for the good of the family, despite their daughters' wishes; the son-in-law's payment to the father/uncle symbolizes the purchase of paternal authority of the bride (Thompson). Such, also emphasizes the objective and disadvantaged role women took on in marriages during ancient history. Regarding first marriages during that era, it was considered important that the wife be a virgin. Adulterous women were seen as individuals who were "poisoning" the future of her offspring and therefore, were severely punished (strangled or burned alive) while adulterous men were not; men were not required to be virgins at the time of a first marriage, emphasizing gender advantages once again in western civilization history (Thompson).

Prominence of female disadvantages during ancient times, arose from the gendered division of labor beginning with the Athenians. The foremost obligation of women in the Athenian society was to bear children and preserve the family line: "women were kept under strict control... they were often cut off from formal education and were expected to remain at home [doing housework or supervising slaves]... some served as "hetairai" or female companions (prostitutes), who provided entertainment and sex for men during their dining parties" (Spielvogel, pages 81-82). Women were rarely able to seek labor roles outside of the household, for they were regarded as inferior and incapable when compared to their male counterparts. This pattern of division was present in the Byzantium Empire as well. Nevertheless, some women did need to find work outside of the home in order to support themselves, but unfortunately, they were often "exchanged" as slaves instead of servants during the time of the Egyptians (Thompson). "It was not always easy to tell which woman in the household is a salaried servant and which one is a slave. In practice, however, the only real difference was that the former could in theory quit and work for someone else while the latter could not. On a day-to-day basis both would have worked and been treated the same" (Thompson). This idea suggests that women were disadvantaged in the labor force regarding opportunity as well as their identity.

After the Black Death, the fourteenth century sought economic difficulties as well as a strengthened division of gender roles. “According to natural order, men were active and domineering, while women were passive and submissive... as more lawyers, doctors, and priests entered society, [such] ideas became widely accepted” (Spielvogel, page 325). In other words, western society during this era suggested that men were to take on job opportunities outside of the home, for they were the only citizens capable of performing such activities. The only skills that women carried and were valued by the community was that of child bearing and restoring the population that declined largely after such spread of disease. Such responsibility made clear of the disadvantage women were at regarding labor during the Italian Renaissance. “For women in the Renaissance, childbirth was a fearful occasion. Not only was it painful, but it could be deadly; as many as ten percent of mothers died in childbirth... surviving mothers often faced the death of their children... almost fifty percent of the children born to merchant families died before the age of twenty” (Spielvogel, page 336). In totality, the labor division of men and women in ancient western civilization left women with limited opportunities outside the home.

Ancient western civilization left the foundation for many women regarding gender inequality and disadvantages in today’s time period. Research shows that patterns of male-dominated government and politics has persisted since the Athenians, Romans, and Greeks. An article posted in 2014 from *The Guardian* states, “At the top of industry and government, the faces remain stubbornly male. In fact, there is evidence that the numbers of women are actually decreasing... only seven of the one-hundred fifty elected heads of state in the world are women, and only eleven of one-hundred ninety-two heads of government... the situation is similar at the level of local government” (Van der Gaag). Another study done by the Center for American Progress indicates similar patterns, indicating that in the United States, fifteen states have no female elected leaders in the Senate or House of Representatives (Chu and Posner). In other words, modern-day statistics show that ancient western civilization helped to shape the disadvantaged status and opportunities women obtain in modern-day society; men continue to be viewed as the only citizens capable of leading countries, as forms of democracy vote in select leaders. Although, unlike the Athenian Roman, and Greek women who depended on their husbands to seek political influence, women in this era are able to run and seek political and government-related opportunities despite their marriage status.

Moreover, western civilization history has helped to shape the disadvantages for women regarding labor and the workforce. Similar to the women who existed during the Byzantium Empire and Italian Renaissance, women in today’s society find themselves at a disadvantage not only when it involves opportunity, but also in regard to status and pay. Research shows that, “although more women are working, they are often still worse paid than men, in part-time jobs or in the huge informal employment sector with little protection and few rights. In many places, the increase in women working is simply driven by the necessity of having two wages to make ends meet... [the] women who are in powerful positions, however, often find they face a daily barrage of sexist behavior from men” (Van der Gaag). Other statistics state: “Although an increasing number of women are either the sole breadwinner for their family or share the role with their partners, women in the United States are paid only seventy-seven cents for every dollar a man makes” (Chu and Posner). Such indicates that women tend to be undervalued in comparison to their male partners, whether that be status, opportunity or pay. In western civilization history, women were viewed as incapable of producing anything other than children, and therefore were given little protection, rights, or respect by the male counterparts who focused on bearing children to keep the family line. In totality, people of ancient western civilization helped to set

the foundation for the similar patterns of political and work-related disadvantages faced by women in society today.

In conclusion, women in ancient history were disadvantaged in regards to the subjects of politics/law, marriage, and work. The identities, status, and opportunities of women during the eras of such empires were largely determined by their surrounding male counterparts, which contributed to the patriarchal society that existed during those times. Women were often seen as objectifiable, seen through their submissive child bearing and marriage faithfulness. Unfortunately, such patterns of behavior still exist in today's society, mainly regarding politics, government, and the labor force, in which women are limited on opportunity, pay, status, and advancement. Ultimately, throughout the history of western civilization, women have been disadvantaged in the realms of politics/the law, marriage, and labor; is not difficult to attribute such disadvantages to those in today's society for history tends to repeat itself.

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