

WOMEN

Had it Tough

In the Old Days

By

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The most telling and tragic commentary on the nature of the male is the record of his dealings with women. After giving his rib for her creation, man, historically, has treated the woman as if she were still a part of his property — his to abuse, sell, favor, or confine as his whims dictated. Ray Baber reminds us “. . . how recently the husband was the sole member of the family who could hold property, make contracts, sue or be sued, vote, and hold offices, to say nothing of his right to demand the earnings of his wife and children. . .”

Perhaps the lens that brings the place of women into sharpest focus is the double standard. Historical sources are replete with examples, and the Bible is one of the most fruitful. Genesis tell us that women were sold into marriage for an established bride price even among God's chosen, the Hebrews.

In Deuteronomy, Chapter 22, we find that if a husband should suspect that all was not as it should be with respect to his bride's virtue, the burden of proof was upon her. Should her evidence not be sufficiently convincing, she was to be stoned to death on her father's doorstep.

“Women Are Inferior . . .”

In the fourth and fifth centuries BC, Athens was the cultural and intellectual matrix of the Western world. Aristotle, whose models for logic and reasoning are still taught in philosophy classes, stated that “Women are by nature inferior to men and, as such, should obey men and perform their functions well.”

In this so-called Golden Age of ancient Greece, a woman appeared to have two choices: She could either marry, manage a household, and bear

children, or she could become an hetaera and entertain the husbands of other women. Demosthenes described this situation reflecting the double standard as follows: “Man has the hetaerae for erotic enjoyment, concubines for daily use, and wives of equal rank to bring up children and be faithful housewives.”

Over the period of several hundred years, during which the wheel of fortune favored Rome over her cultural ancestor, Athens, women began to gain in status and legal rights. However, the Roman Cato stated in effect that an unfaithful wife might be put to death without further ado. On the other hand, should the man be the one who permitted his affections to wander, the wife had no right to raise so much as a finger against him.

A Long, Painful Period

In the interest of time and brevity, the matter of the vicissitudes in the welfare of women in the periods of Western history such as the early Christian period, the Dark Ages, the Medieval period, and the Renaissance cannot be considered. No reference is made, moreover, to the civilizations of the East — China, Japan, Korea, India, or the many other countries with their own traditions concerning the role, status, and treatment of women.

During the seventeenth century, women began to proclaim publicly their dissatisfaction with the double basis of treatment in such areas as occupation, recreation, politics, manners, and morals. In England, Mary Astell and later Mary Wollstonecraft were outstanding voices in the cause for women's rights. However, the early interest such individuals generated, began to wane in the nineteenth century as the influence of Queen Victoria of England became established.

Victoria's influence in Anglo-Saxon culture, characterized by sanction of the passive, domestic, traditional, and, insofar as possible, asexual roles for women, was a force to be reckoned with. Among other things the vestiges of Victorian influence have accomplished has been to keep psychiatrists' offices filled with guilt-ridden souls in whom their own inclinations and Victoria's admonitions have never achieved a happy reconciliation.

The Feminist Movement

The 1840's are the years when suffrage and feminist campaigns were launched in earnest. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the first women's rights conference in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York. Susan B. Anthony, Julia Ward

Howe and Lucy Stone are other names that stand out in the history of the feminist movement.

Even though progress since the 1840's has been relatively continuous and oftentimes dramatic, temporary setbacks have occurred. Carrie Nation's raids on saloons and bars with ax in hand unfortunately were identified in the minds of many with the suffrage movement, and the gears of progress ground more slowly for a time. The suffrage movement culminated in the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, which provided that all women in our country could vote. Since that time most of us have forgotten that suffrage was ever an issue. Using the record of history as an mnemonic device, however, we cannot help but be impressed with the progress in practically every sphere of life.

At present, for example, there are more than 23,000,000 women in the labor market, and practically all occupations are represented. The women who have been elected to Congress have achieved the third highest elective office in the United States. That such achievements on the part of women of our nation represent progress cannot be gainsaid. That the challenge is not over for those who would splinter a lance in the cause of further feminine progress and attenuation of the double standard is indicated by such figures as the following: Of the 435 representatives in Congress, only 11 are women; of the 422 federal judges, only 3 are women; only 2 women have ever held cabinet rank, i.e., Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Oveta Culp Hobby, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under Dwight D. Eisenhower.

There appears to have been much progress by women in Western society in almost all areas of endeavor. While much has been accomplished, much remains to be accomplished. We are in need of a frame of reference now that will integrate the past with the promise of the future — a perceptual lens that will bring clarity into the picture and that will point a firm path to equitable status in both domestic and occupational endeavor.

DIFFICULT TO ADAPT

People do not quickly adapt themselves to a shift in their diets. Changing food habits takes time, say researchers at North Dakota State University. It took 200 years for the potato to be accepted in Europe, 100 years for the tomato, and, in more recent times, 30 years for the grapefruit to be accepted in Britain.

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