

*In Depth***Women in Patriarchal Societies**

Most agricultural civilizations, including China, downgraded the status and potential of women, at least according to modern Western standards and to the implicit standards of hunting and gathering societies. Agricultural civilizations were characteristically patriarchal; that is, they were run by men and based on the assumption that men directed political, economic, and cultural life. Furthermore, as agricultural civilizations developed over time and became more prosperous and more elaborately organized, the status of women deteriorated from its initial level. Individual families were normally set up on a patriarchal basis. The husband and father determined fundamental conditions and made the key decisions, and the woman gave humble obedience to this male authority at least in principle. Patriarchal family structure rested on men's control of most or all property, starting with land itself. Marriage was based on property relationships, and it was assumed that marriage, and therefore subordination to men, was the normal condition for the vast majority of women. A revealing symptom of patriarchy in family life was the fact that after marrying, a woman usually moved to the orbit (and often the residence) of her husband's family.

Characteristic patriarchal conditions had developed in Mesopotamian civilization. Marriages were arranged for women by their parents, and a formal contract was drawn up. The husband served as authority over his wife and children just as he did over his slaves. Early Sumerians may have given women greater latitude than they enjoyed later on. Their religion attributed considerable power to female sexuality, and their law gave women important rights, so that they could not be treated as outright property. Still, even in Sumerian law, the adultery of a wife was punishable by death, while a husband's adultery was treated far more lightly—a double standard characteristic of patriarchy. Mesopotamian societies after Sumerian times began to emphasize the importance of a woman's virginity at marriage and to impose the veil on respectable women when they were in public to emphasize their modesty. These changes showed a progressive cramping of women's social position and daily freedom. At all points a good portion of Mesopotamian law (such as the Hammurabic code) was given over to prescriptions for women, assuring certain basic protections but clearly emphasizing limits and inferiority.

Specific patriarchal conditions varied from one agricultural civilization to another. This means that comparisons are important, and sometimes subtle.

Egyptian civilization gave upper-class women more credit than Mesopotamia did, and there were several powerful queens. Jewish law traced descent from mothers rather than fathers, though it held women to be separate and inferior even in worship. Confucianism, in China, had important implications for women, involving recommendations of good treatment but amid demonstrations of deference and subservience to men. Variety, in other words, operated within a clearly patriarchal framework.

Why was patriarchy so pervasive? As agriculture improved with the use of better techniques, women's labor, though still absolutely vital, became less important than it had been in hunting-and-gathering societies. This was particularly true in the upper classes and in cities, where men frequently took over the most productive work—craft production, for example—and political leadership. The inferior position of women was less marked in peasant families, where their work was essential. More generally, agricultural societies were based on concepts of property. It seemed essential for men to know who their heirs were, in order to pass along land; and this meant attention to regulating women's sexuality, to try to assure faithfulness. All this helps explain why women became seen as both inferior and ornamental, really as part of men's property. Patriarchy, in sum, responded to economic and legal conditions in agricultural civilizations and often deepened over time.

Patriarchy raises important questions about women themselves. Many women internalized patriarchal culture, believing that they should obey and please men and agreeing that they were inferior. But patriarchy did not preclude some important options for women. In many societies a minority of women could gain some relief through religious functions, which could provide them a chance to operate independent of family structures. Patriarchal laws defined some rights for women even within marriage, protecting them at least in theory from the worst abuses. Confucian theorists argued that women must obey men but urged men to treat them decently in return. Women could also wield informal power in patriarchal societies by their emotional hold over husbands or sons. Such power was indirect, behind the scenes, but a forceful woman might use these means to figure prominently in a society's history. Women could also form networks, within a large household. Older women, who commanded the obedience of many daughters-in-law as well as unmarried daughters

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ters and servant women, could powerfully shape the activities of a family.

The fact remains that patriarchy was a commanding theme in most agricultural civilizations. Enforcement of patriarchy, through law and culture, provided one means by which these societies regulated their members and tried to achieve order. While women were not reduced to literal servitude by most patriarchal systems, they might have come close. Their options were severely constrained. Girls were reared to accept patriarchal conditions, and boys were fully conscious of their own superiority. In many agricultural civilizations, patriarchy dictated that boys, because of their importance in carrying on the

family name and chief economic activities, were more likely to survive. When population excess threatened a family's well-being, patriarchal assumptions often determined that female infants be killed as a means of population control.

**Questions:** How do you think most women reared in a patriarchal society would react to their conditions? What might cause differences in women's conditions in patriarchal societies, or from one society to another? Why were upper-class women often considered more inferior to men than lower-class women were? **How could patriarchy be considered a form of cultural glue?**