

The treatment of women from the beginning of our species has been shaped by biology: female humans generally smaller than males, physically weaker, and hampered by childbirth and lactation. Even hunter-gatherer tribes, whose survival depended upon mobility, learned to space between births. A woman on the move can carry only one or two children.

After agriculture replaced hunting/gathering, when humans settled in villages, towns, and city-states, spacing childbirth was no longer necessary. Agriculture needed plentiful labor, and if it was not willing, it could be captured and enslaved. In addition, disparity of wealth came from the need in agricultural societies to maintain order and apportion work: creating and maintaining irrigation systems, harvesting and dividing up crop harvests, and protecting against attackers who would seize the property and enslave the inhabitants.

All of these tasks were relegated to men, who were rewarded for their leadership with a larger share of wealth and a surplus of women for sexual pleasure, breeding, and domestic and field labor. Women became property, which remained until women in Britain and the United States got the vote after World War I. This made them politically equal to men.

Contraception (available to upper-class women in Edwardian England in the 19th century and then available for all American women to help plan family size), freed women from the inevitability of childbearing. Women having one or two children rather than eight to ten had an enormous benefit for their longevity and for other options in work. They were no longer just for breeding and domestic labor. They entered the ranks of human beings with most of the rights and privileges of men.

As the rest of the world, long the slaves of tradition, was exposed to Western values after two world wars and exposure to modernity through movies and other communications, the status of women began to change everywhere. Women began to demand the same freedoms that Western women enjoyed, but faced much more pushback from their men, religions, and rigid cultures. The Muslim world was, and still is, the most resistant to the emancipation of women. Nonetheless, these new standards began to emerge among their upper classes, many educated in the West.

Turkey, the country that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, was the first Muslim state to emancipate its women, outlawing the garments that kept them invisible, veiled and in sweltering cloaks. The Muslim clerics grumbled, but lost the battle.

Iran followed this emancipation, but the Shah had to put down riots from the fanatics. Afghanistan tried, but their king was murdered for attempting to emancipate women from the burka. But in the Muslim world, upper class women have demanded and received some release from religious oppression.

Today, despite the West\222s emancipation, the status of women around the world is still problematic. The "Me Too" movement has revealed the still-pervasive sexual bullying that has always haunted women, and certainly still afflicts women in even modernizing countries, such as Egypt, India, Pakistan, China, Japan, and much of Africa. The difference is that in the West, such throwbacks of bad behavior are condemned by good men, and by the law.

But there are still those who persist in wanting control over women, even in this country. The very idea that women should have control over their own bodies, fertility, and sexuality, is under attack in our more backward states. Women cannot be equal to men when they do not have equal control over their own bodies.

In Indonesia, a school bookkeeper recorded her boss\222 lewd phone calls as proof she was being harassed. She was sentenced to six months in prison for "distributing obscene material." Her boss was promoted. In the US, a woman fearing an abusive husband, gathered up his gun collection and turned it in to the police. She was arrested for theft. This is shameful.

Watching women playing soccer in the World Cup games or golf in PGA tournaments, universally admired, shows what women can do. We honor women astronauts, judges, physicists, and world leaders. Enlightenment is the remedy for stupid traditions and

mean spirits.

685 words

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