"Women in Prehistory"
by
Adrian Novotny
Department of Social Science
Long Beach City College
4901 East Carson Street
Long Beach, CA 90808
email: anovotny@lbcc.edu

abstract

In the vast majority of world cultures, women are second-class citizens at best. In many cultures even today, wives can be purchased on the open market, much like any other property a man might own. Even in supposedly enlightened societies such as ours, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions and constitute the fastest growing segment of those living in poverty. It seems logical to ask if things have always been this way or if, instead, the oppression of women is a more recent phenomenon in terms of world cultural history. This brief paper, meant to be a handout as part of a presentation on gender issues, reviews some of the highlights of women in prehistory and examines events from thousands of years ago that are thought to have led to the oppression of women today.

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Outline of the Presentation

I. Introduction
   A. 99.5% of human existence as gatherers and hunters (foragers), from at least the hominid revolution of ca. 2.5 mya (million years ago)
   B. sexual division of labor

II. The band...in the Garden of Eden
   A. structure
      1. size, nomadic lifestyle
      2. kinship terms
      3. egalitarianism, both economic and political
      4. the "Original Affluent Society"
      5. "work" in prehistory (hours/day, days/week)
   B. gathering for a living
      1. contribution to the food supply
      2. relationship with nature
      3. sharing and cooperation="human nature"

III. Women's physiology and reproduction
   A. synchronicity with Lunar cycles
   B. relationship with nature
   C. menstruation from a hunter's perspective

IV. The plant world
   A. nutrition, medicine, and healing
   B. science (astronomy), time reference, and cycles of harvest

V. Spirituality
   A. the sacredness of life (and the creation of life)
   B. links with the Moon
   C. Mother Earth correlations
   D. Venus figurines

VI. Fall from grace
   A. 10 kya (kilo or thousand years ago), the Neolithic revolution (incipient food production)
      1. concepts of surplus and private property: ownership of land, crops, people, etc.
      2. realization of paternity in reproduction through the observation of domesticated animals and animal husbandry
   B. the need to ensure the legitimacy of offspring ("legal" and "rightful" heirs)
      1. virgin brides
      2. cloistering of females from early childhood
      3. strict laws regarding women's sexuality
C. cultural practices designed to maintain control over women
   1. bride price, bride service, and the dowry
   2. patrilocal postmarital residence
   3. divorce laws, inheritance laws, gender differences in the
      enforcement of existing laws, e.g. rape, assault, murder, genital mutilation,
      foot binding, etc.
   4. patrilineal descent systems
   5. patriarchal spiritual and political systems

VII. What is to be done?
   A. consciousness as a first step to solutions
   B. awareness that every child represents a new opportunity for significant change
   C. help others understand the unfairness and oppression we inherited; don't pass it on

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The Band

For 99.5% of human existence, all humans on Earth, lived basically the same way. From the
time we first made the transition from an ape-like ancestor to a human being, until about ten
thousand years ago, gathering and hunting was the only lifestyle that humans lived, and their
social structure came to be referred to as the band.

This is a very controversial area of prehistory. Beyond the obvious objections that creationists
raise, there are also controversies among paleoanthropologists as to when the transition from ape
to human occurred and in what geographic location. Suffice to say, within paleontological
circles, there is general agreement that we have been human; that is, we have had a human
physiology and have behaved in basically human ways, for at least several hundred thousand
years or more.

I personally feel that we became human nearer to several million years ago. We now have solid
evidence that we were fully bipedal by at least four million years ago and that with the transition
to Homo erectus about two million years ago, we had a brain size and consequently the intellect,
to elaborate our lifestyle to the point of developing behaviors that are now called culture and are
distinctly human.

Therefore, from several million years ago to the advent of food production about ten thousand
years ago, all our ancestors, in Africa, Asia, throughout the entire old world, were wandering
nomads, sustaining themselves by gathering vegetable foods, supplemented by hunting. To live
basically the same way for thousands of generations instilled patterns of life and ways of
thinking that I refer to as "human nature."

In these gathering and hunting bands, human nature was based on the sexual division of labor.
Women gathered and man hunted, for the most part. Not, as many seem to currently believe,
because of any particular skills or abilities men may have possessed, such as superior speed,
cunning, endurance, or as some feminists say, aggressive tendencies. It was simply a matter of human reproduction. Women, through most of their adult lives, would either be pregnant, nursing, or primary care-givers for their children and therefore somewhat restricted in terms of long distance movement. Women's activities consequently tended to be more localized in the area of the base camp, while men periodically went off on more distant excursions in pursuit of game, sometimes for days at a time. Remember too, that humans tended to live in the most Eden-like habitats in prehistory, not as native people today who are marginalized and forced into the least hospitable remote deserts and high mountain regions unwanted by agriculturally based societies.

Gathering and associated activities, therefore, typify the lives of women for over 99% of human existence. As such, gathering, more than any other activity, defined women in prehistory.

Women gather in social groups consisting of a number of adult women, children of both sexes, infants, and toddlers. This would tend to be a noisy group, lots of children sounds and conversation, laughter, etc. Plants, unlike animals, do not flee from such sounds, so the social nature of the female-centered group is no detriment to the group's success in food-getting.

All women of the same generation refer to one another as "sister." All women one generation older are called "mother." Two generations older are "grandmother," and so on. One generation younger are called "daughter," and two generations younger are "granddaughter." The same terms of address apply to the males of the group, i.e. "brother," "father," "son," etc. This type of kinship terminology still prevails among most of the existing gathering and hunting groups today.

Imagine the solidarity and closeness of such a group, where everyone is referred to and thought of as a close relative. Bonding between women was strong and lifelong. Marriage customs were exogamous; that is, mates were found in other bands, but there were no rules, as found in most societies today, that women must leave their families of birth in order to join their husband's family upon marriage (i.e. patrilocal postmarital residence rule). In prehistory, sometimes the new wife joined her husband's band, sometimes he joined her band. In any event, there was still contact with the family of orientation (i.e. the family into which one was born) after marriage.

Subsistence activity, for women, gathering, provided up to 80-85% of all the food for the group. Anthropologists living with contemporary gathering people, find that women have an intimate knowledge of plants. They not only know the nutritional value of plants, but also plants' healing nature as well. Approximately 95% of all medicines are derived from plants, consequently the grandmothers were logically the healers--the first shamans, who were entrusted with the band's health and well-being. Native people tend to associate health with spiritual balance and conversely, illness represents spiritual imbalance. Grandmothers, therefore, were the links with the spirit world as well.

Since grandmothers were entrusted with both food and health, they were relied upon to make important decisions regarding the band. Although bands are egalitarian, and all decisions are made by consensus, the grandmothers would, logically have the last word with respect to the band's movement in their nomadic lifestyle. They must ensure there would be adequate food
available at the band's destination. How would the grandmothers know food would be available when the band arrived at the new location?

Obviously, the grandmothers, the repositories of all such knowledge, knew their regions well, they had been to these locations many times. But they also knew the plants well. And, perhaps most importantly, they had to be able to calculate the passage of time. They had to have some sense of season to forecast the optimum time to be in a specific region to obtain the desired food just as it ripened. Women, therefore understood the passage of time.

How did women mark the passage of time? First off, women's bodies are synchronized with the largest observable object in the sky, the Moon. The Moon's full cycle is twenty-eight days-- the same as a woman's cycle. Women noticed they were somehow linked to the Moon. They watched the phases of the Moon and marked the periodicity of its phases. This became the short count of time. Later, more sophisticated observations of the Sun resulted in the long count of time, the seasons. This meant the band could enjoy Nature's bounty as it happened. No longer was subsistence a random gamble. Thus was born a significant feature of human culture...planning.

Another aspect of the menstrual cycle that relates to prehistory involves men's interpretation of menstruation. Men, remember, are hunters. These hunters live with other humans (women) who bleed for about five days a month and yet don't die! What sort of magic is this? In the reality of the hunter this is indeed a supernatural phenomenon. Coupled with that, women are able to produce offspring with their own bodies and go on to nurse them using only their bodies. To men, this is pure magic! Men have some of the same physical features, nipples, for example, but they don't work the same as women's nipples and breasts. Clearly women are magical.

All things come from the Earth, and all people come from the bodies of women. Earth is always referred to as "Mother." No wonder the world's first depictions of deities are all in the form of females with exaggerated sexuality. These "Venus Figurines" are the only representations of human-like forms for thousands of years over the entire world. They are often referred to as "fertility symbols," but I personally feel they are the first depictions of the "faces of god." Remember that most gatherers and hunters did not comprehend the role males played in human reproduction. If anything, males were thought to "open the passageway" through which a spirit, usually of a recently deceased ancestor, could enter the woman's body to grow and be born again.

The Fall from Grace

Eventually, whether from jealousy or insecurity, men would come to demean and devalue the sacredness of women. Menstruation would become "dirty" and "polluting," a reminder of sin, a curse on women. Women and their reproductive capacity would become chattel, the property of men to be used or abused as men desired. How could such a complete reversal of position have occurred?

About ten thousand years ago, for various reasons still being debated among prehistorians, some people ceased their nomadic wandering and began to produce their food under controlled
conditions referred to as cultivation and domestication. Soon humans rationalized such behavior by associating food production with "humanness" itself, e.g. horticulture, agriculture, and disparaged humans who remained nomadic foragers (e.g. "Jews," "Gypsies," the "homeless," etc).

With sedentarism and food production came surplus and the concept of private property -- the twin motivations and justifications for human violence against other humans. The rest, as they say, is dark history: wars, raids, violence, oppression, sexism, racism, etc. These destructive behaviors have become, in the last ten thousand years, the very hallmark of "civilization."

And what of women? With the domestication of animals, humans finally observed the relationship between copulation and conception. Men understood paternity. With the advent of private property, and the development of inheritance customs, men found a need to ensure the legitimacy of their offspring. To accomplish this, they set out to control women's lives, especially women's sexuality, from birth to death. This control takes the form of cloistering -- where girls and women are kept at home, "protected" from public view and from casual relationships with strange men. The necessity for virgin brides arose. Parents did all they could to ensure their daughters avoided sex at all costs until marriage. Marriages were arranged by the parents to benefit the family, not for the children's sake. Wives were not permitted to be in public without being shrouded or veiled and without a trusted escort. Infidelity on the part of the wife became cause for severe punishment, often by death, while male infidelity was promoted through multiple wives, concubines, and "outside" lovers. Female genital mutilation began. This practice is still a significant form of oppression in the modern world where it is estimated that more than 100 million women have been surgically "protected" from sexual sensation or having sex outside marriage at all. In China, women's feet were bound (i.e. broken) to ensure that women wouldn't wander off, while "fashion" in our own culture often promotes an image of women as frail, helpless, and childlike, encouraging males to assume the roles of protector, dominator, and authority in relationships.

All these practices guarantee the legitimacy of a man's offspring, so his private property stays in "legitimate" hands. Women remain property in much of the modern world. Look at popular cultural practices to validate this statement. For example, patrilocal postmarital residence, the most common form of residence rule, uproots a woman and places her in a "new" family where she is often subordinated to everyone in the new household. She is easily abused since she has no support from parents, brothers, or sisters in her new "family." Likewise, why should her parents educate her, spend money on her upbringing, or maintain her health with expensive treatments or medicines? As the Chinese say, "To raise a daughter is like watering your neighbor's garden." All that a family does for a daughter only benefits someone else. Female infanticide and neglect are the inevitable consequences of such beliefs. Lastly, to perpetuate this subordination, many women are denied literacy and educational opportunities as well.

Bride price and dowry are customs which reflect the institutionalization of sexism in the modern world. Though giving money to the parents of a bride is often explained as "compensating her parents for the loss of her labor," what these cash transactions actually amount to is bride by purchase. When a man buys something (or in this case, someone), he has absolute control over
his "property." Again, as the Chinese say, "A bride is like a pony, to be ridden or beaten as a man sees fit."

The removal of women from traditional professions such as midwifery, pharmacology, healing, and spiritual leadership was completed during the "burning years" of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries in Europe when tens of thousands to millions of women were hung or burned at the stake for practicing "witchcraft". When the dust had settled, women were no longer to be found in the professions of pediatrics, general medicine, or organized religion.

Anyone doubting the institutionalized nature of the oppression of women in the modern world has simply to examine current divorce or inheritance laws, or gender differences in the enforcement of existing laws, such as rape, assault, and murder, to detect glaring gender inconsistencies.

For the sake of our children, if not for our own sake, we should become aware of these things. There is no educational requirement to perpetuate unfairness and oppression upon young people. Consciousness, remember, is the first step toward solving problems. Those who become aware have begun the process of healing.

Suggested Reading


