

WOMEN OVERVIEW

The destiny or life-task of a girl is the achievement of womanhood. Not that womanhood can be clearly defined and described to the satisfaction of all. But we recognize that anything that hinders a girl from achieving full womanhood is wrong. Whatever in a family, in education, in society that prevents a girl from becoming all she is meant to be is wrong and should be changed. Recent studies seem to show how the media's objectivization of women causes girls to lose a certain measure of confidence, spontaneity, and assertiveness around the time of puberty.

The Hebrew meaning of Eve is life-giver, mother of all, or brightness. In the goddesses of ancient societies we find characteristics of womanhood. Ancient Hebrews wrote about a virtuous woman (or should we say "Hebrew men described the ideal wife") in this way:

She sees that her business goes well,
and never puts out her lamp at night.
She holds the distaff in her hand,
and her fingers grasp the spindle.
She is open-handed to the wretched
and generous to the poor.
She has no fear for her household when it snows,
for they are wrapped in two cloaks...
She is clothed in dignity and power,
and can afford to laugh at tomorrow.
When she opens her mouth it is to speak wisely...
(Proverbs 31:18-21, 25-26a, NEB)

Gender wars refer, not only to struggles between men and women, but to differences in opinions about the nature and proper roles of the sexes. In some societies there seems to be no issue regarding gender roles. In others, many men and women say there is no problem while complaints are heard from many bright and articulate girls and women. The latter part of the twentieth century saw the rise of the feminist movement.

The twentieth century has seen great changes in the position of women in society. Women have struggled for emancipation from confinement as property or educational and career limitations to greater freedom and opportunities. Although there is disagreement regarding women's goals and lifestyle values, many see great gaps before some kind of equality of the sexes can be achieved. Many religiously or socially conservative women see essential differences in genders and roles. They may resist some efforts to change or even long for earlier, more traditional ways. Most men and women in all societies, however, applaud the advances in educational and career opportunities achieved by women globally in the twentieth century.

In the U.S., for instance, the Constitution did not provide women with guaranteed voting rights. Gradually during the nineteenth century, suffrage or voting was opened to women in a few states. National women's suffrage only came with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919. Educational and vocational opportunities slowly opened during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Only since the 1960s did women find it possible on a broad scale to enter or start up their own businesses, have their own credit cards, buy and sell their own homes. The sexual revolution of that same era brought greater freedom and dangers to men and women. From the 1960s on, women

found much less stigma in out-of-wedlock childbirth. One tenth of U.S. births were of unwed mothers in 1970; by the late 1990s almost one third of U.S. childbirth's involved unwed mothers. Since 1973, women have the right to an abortion.

Attitudes and lifestyle changes were occurring. The typical U.S. woman married just under 22 year of age at the turn of the century. Just after WWII (in 1947) the average age if a first marriage had dropped to 20. By 1979 it was up again to 22 and to 25 by the late 1990s.

Some current attitudes are shaped by the radical increase in U.S. divorce since the 1950s. Currently, almost 40% of U.S. Americans in their twenties come from divorced families. According to the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center (Univ. of Chicago), 29% of unmarried U.S. women between 18 and 34 believed it should be more difficult to get a divorce in the mid-seventies. By 1998, 41% of this same age group believed it should be more difficult to get a divorce. In the mid-1970s, 48% of this age group said adultery is always wrong; up to 79% in 1998. Today 47% of this unmarried age group of women think it best to live with a man and then marry him; 36% believe living together should wait for marriage.

In 1978, fewer than half the women (21-34) polled by Yankelovich Partners said that every women should experience having a child. In the late 1990s this conventional opinion had increased to two-thirds. Managing partner of Yankelovich, J. Walker Smith, reaches this conclusion: "Young people are pulling back from the experimentation in lifestyle that baby boomers did at the same age. It does not mean they want to live life as Ozzie and Harriet. They want to enjoy all the choices available to them, but they want to return to al the traditional types of satisfaction." (1998, October 25. Boston Globe, p. A30)

The idea of womanhood, the place of women in society, and the slights and injustices women suffer need to be expressed by women themselves. This topic needs more article, book and research reviews by women on this subject. That will be a goal of the next revision of this Encyclopedia.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In your experience how well do girls and boys, women and men, discuss their different perspectives and feelings? Why do you think this is so?
2. What do you hear as the different voices of women today? What positions can you distinguish among women?
3. How important is it for the U.S. to have a woman president? The U.N. to have a woman as Secretary General?
4. How do you see women's places in business improving?
5. How do you think women and men, mothers and fathers, should work out their domestic roles?

IMPLICATIONS

1. For all the dialogue, and for all that has been written, there are still tensions between men and women in society and in personal relations.
2. Boys in some societies begin hurting girls (because they are girls) at a young age. Some of that carries over into manhood.
3. Men should be able to say how they need women generally and specifically.
4. The efforts of women in all fields are exceptional and need to be given serious attention.
5. This article is limited because of its male authorship.

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