

New Kingdom and Roles of Women



Egyptian women were highly respected

The position of women in the New Kingdom was based on a unique combination of ancient tradition and modern sophistication.

The opportunities available to most women were limited by centuries of tradition and deeply held religious beliefs.

But women also had legal and financial rights that were remarkably modern and sophisticated. This was in marked contrast to the customs in other cultures during the same period.

Know your place

Egyptian society was highly structured: a woman's social position was largely defined by the status of her father and husband. According to 'Maat', the Egyptian view of the order of the universe, it was definitely a man's world.

Only men were allowed to work in the government, so only they could hold real power. But high ranking women - for example, the wife, mother or daughter of an important politician - exerted a lot of covert influence.

Women in power

Very occasionally, a woman ruled in her own right. For example, Ahhotep ruled while her son, Ahmose, was still growing up and Hatshepsut even became pharaoh. But she still needed to rely on the reputation of her late father and had to pretend he'd nominated her as his successor.

Outside the royal family, women were allowed to take paid work. Some wives helped out their husbands with farm work, while others weaved for extra money. Records from the village of Deir el-Medineh show that some women bartered surplus supplies.

A woman's place

Few women actually worked outside the home as it was frowned on. While their husbands and fathers held down jobs, the main role of Egyptian women was to look after the home and the children.

As there was no contraception, women would have spent much of their life either pregnant or breastfeeding. This, along with the housework, would have left little time for other work.

Equal before the law

Yet women enjoyed extensive legal rights. Egyptian culture recognized a wife as her husband's closest companion. In fact, wives were seen as so important that it was an offence against Maat for a pharaoh to rule without one.

As her husband's closest companion, an Egyptian wife was allowed to represent him in his business affairs. They were equal to men before the law and legally responsible for their actions. Women could be named in legal contracts, attend court on their own, bring lawsuits, and even own or rent property under their own name.

Financial independence

Egyptian law gave every child an equal inheritance. Although most women were too poor to own anything other than a cooking pot and some clothes, this meant some women were quite rich and financially independent.

For these women, life was good and many were very cultured. They might own land or have monuments in their name, and they had access to makeup. This involved grinding minerals to make a paste. Ground serpentine made a green eye shadow, while others blacked kohl around the eyes or mixed red ochre and animal fat to produce lip paint and rouge.

Ancient and modern

Early pregnancy tests told them when they were expecting a child. If a pregnant woman urinated on wheat and barley, her hormones would cause both to bud. It was extremely accurate and the idea isn't much different from pregnancy tests today.

Once pregnant, women wore amulets honoring the pregnant god Taweret to help them in childbirth. This sums up life for Egyptian woman - a strange mix of the very traditional and the surprisingly modern. They were limited by their gender, but they were also highly respected. Most remarkable, were the legal rights and responsibilities they held. Western women would not achieve these for another 4,000 years.

<http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/women.html>

Women



Just outside Thebes, the sun is rising on a small house near the Nile. Nafrini is already up - with a farmer as a husband, plus three small children, she's got a lot to do.

She starts by preparing breakfast of bread and fruit for her family who, judging from the noise, are all now out of bed.

Like most Egyptian women, she's wearing a rough linen dress and has a reed necklace with an amulet to the pregnant goddess Tawaret - believed to help during the danger of childbirth.

Although they aren't wealthy, Nafrini and her husband, Sebi, can still afford a servant, Akana, who helps around the house and with the children. Once her husband has left for work, Nafrini leaves the kids with Akana and goes to the market. She needs to stock up the store cupboard - basics like lentils, chickpeas, lettuce, onion and garlic. She might buy meat for a special occasion, but it's much too expensive to eat every day.

When she gets back, she sprinkles water and natron cleansing salts to keep the insects away. She puts down charcoal and powdered bebet-plant to kill the fleas.

Today is laundry day, so Nafrini gathers up the bed linen and the children for a trip to the river. She quite likes this job. The day isn't too hot yet and she gets the latest news and gossip from her friends - always keeping one eye on the kids.

She normally puts the laundry in the river and pounds it against a large stone - this is long before detergent or soap. But today, all the best stones have been taken, so she has to tread the laundry against pebbles in the shallows. When everything is clean, she lays it out to dry in the sun.

While she waits, she tells the children to look for some reeds, straw and dried dung to fuel the fire. When the washing is dry, she fills her large water-pot and they all go home.

Afternoon

After putting away the laundry, she sits down with Akana and the children for a light lunch of bread and lettuce. The children are arguing and pulling each other's hair, so she tells them to go out and look for wild honey, which she uses to sweeten food - sugar won't be discovered for thousands of years yet.

With the house now quiet, Nafrini can get on with some cooking. She lights the conical mud fire and starts grinding emmet wheat to make flour for the bread. She adds water to make dough, which she rounds off into flat loaves and then puts in the oven.

While the bread is baking, she starts on the beer. From the oven, she takes some partly-baked barley dough and crumbles it into a large vat. She adds some water and date juice, and leaves it to ferment.

Evening

The bread is baked, the children have brought back some honey and Sebi will soon be home, so Nafrini starts on dinner. Today, the Tutanwhatsit family is having a stew of lentils, chickpeas and onion. Nafrini knows Sebi will be happy, because the night before he had been grumbling about eating nothing but bread. Everything is put in a clay pot and goes into the oven.

Sebi arrives home and the family sits down to eat. By the time they've finished, it's six o'clock and the sun has almost set. With no electricity, their day follows the rise and fall of the sun. They all go to bed and are soon fast asleep.