

What can historians learn from the study of gender relationships in the past?

Most societies today run in a patriarchy; this culture of androcentrism originated approximately 12,000 years ago, during the development of agricultural settlements, in which power shifted to the physically stronger man, leading women to naturally adopt a submissive role and undertake domestic responsibilities within these communities (Ananthaswamy and Douglas, 2018). Although, in the present day, we have a much more developed view of gender as a social construct, these assigned roles that first established themselves at the beginning of human history have permeated time, continuing to influence the world religiously, socially and politically. By exploring how gender relationships have both influenced and been influenced by these factors, historians can deepen their understanding of events of the past and use this to give context to modern day affairs.

Historically, theology and gender have always been heavily intertwined. One of the earliest examples of this can be seen in the first translations of the Bible, in which the original Hebrew for Adam translates as either 'human' or 'man,' (Gamola, 2014) with translators interpreting this name for the first human as the latter. This application of gender to the creation story permanently altered its meaning: 'it is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.' (Gen 2:18) Now, rather than an illustration of humans and their need for companionship, it has shaped the western belief that women are made to be subservient to men, and, although in the modern-day religious ideology is not as potent as it has been historically, this philosophy still influences how people view gender. For example, the witch trials that swept across Europe and colonial America, the hysteria generated from this culminating in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692-93 (Wallenfeldt, 1998). Although men were tried, it is approximated 75-90% of women made up the accused across these hunts (Gibson, 2023, p. 17). This can be accredited to the weaponising of the Genesis story (Steadman, 1965) in which Eve, the first woman, is tempted by the snake, the devil, as well

as the exclusion of women from the Church, with many instead finding spirituality in herbal medicines and administering care to their small communities, which often didn't have access to doctors. It is through the empowerment found in this practice that was ultimately their downfall, with clergymen demonising herbalism, creating myths of witches selling their soul to the devil and – much like Eve – being 'tempted' by him, as well as stories of them murdering children to enact the will of Satan (Gibson, 2023, p. 22). Despite this phenomenon now viewed as nonsensical and much of it written off as a fantastical myth used to persecute women, the 'witch hunt' still exists today, simply in a different form. For example, the 2022 Depp-Heard trial saw social media pick apart the intimate details of the relationship between Actor and Musician Johnny Depp and Actress Amber Heard, a once nuanced case transformed into a circus, mocking Amber Heard for her testimony against her ex-husband, who was praised by many despite him being found guilty of 12 of the 14 alleged assaults on her, as well as text messages being exposed in which he writes 'let's burn her' (Honderich, 2024). This almost ironically parallels the original witch trials in which women found guilty were physically burned at the stake, made an example of and, much like Heard, met with ridicule as a result of not aligning with the public's idea of a 'perfect victim', with many women accused of witchcraft often being widows or spinsters. It is these events that serve as a reminder that women are still being overly scrutinised, in comparison to men, when speaking up and defying gender roles and assumptions that historians can trace back to religious influence from centuries ago.

Although it is clear the impact had by Judaeo-Christian ideas of men and women, there have also been many societies that have alternative relationships with gender, for example *The Symposium*, in which Plato explains the myth of the androgyne, describing an understanding of gender before the definitions of man and woman, introducing 'a neuter and too many others to count,' as well as indigenous cultures holding the belief of 'two-spirit', in

which people held high positions in aboriginal societies for expressing both feminine and masculine attributes, as well as having the capacity to form romantic relationships with people of the same sex (Bahr, 1998). It is, however, this Judaeo-Christian social hierarchy that has enforced itself upon most cultures through colonisation, introducing the heteronorm (Roseneil, 2005) and ostracising those in society who had previously been praised for not aligning with western ideas of gender and the roles in which they should assume. Therefore, Historians can observe that by colonisers pushing their societal norms and marginalising other cultures, which can be most notably seen in the spread of Christianity through western missionaries in Africa during the 1800s (Nkomazana and Setume, 2016), they have also enforced their views of gender worldwide, with western superiority clearly linking to male superiority. It is then this culture of dominating those seen as 'less than' that has been so cemented, it still influences how women, in particular women of colour and women who defy heteronormativity, are judged both in their daily lives and through the eyes of the media, all as a result of religious ideology that has been pushed by oppressors.

Politics has always seen an overrepresentation of men, with women in the UK not achieving the same voting rights until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928. Since then, gender has been a key component in the recent changes to political life, having a huge impact today despite its short history. Since women were first elected in the UK in 1918, there has been a continual increase in the amount of women in parliament, and as of 2019 there were 220 women MPs. Crucially, 55% of these were under the Labour party, and 31% Conservative (Buchanan, 2024). After 1918, there has also been a series of milestones achieved in laws protecting women and moving closer to gender equality, for example: the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, preventing women from being excluded from professional roles on the basis of their gender or marital status; the Abortion Act of 1967; the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which criminalised marital rape, and the Additional Paternity Leave

Regulations in 2010, allowing fathers and partners of mothers to take up to 2 weeks of paid paternity leave. Despite these monumental change to law, women still experience underrepresentation in politics internationally, with the world requiring five times as many women in political leadership positions to reach equal representation (Herre, 2024). And while more women continue to access higher education and enter male dominated fields, have more bodily autonomy, and experience new social liberties, the progression to gender equality is far from linear. For example, although there has been a series of laws introduced to protect women, the National Police Chief's Council, in 2024, declared Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) as a 'national emergency', with it being estimated that one in three women worldwide have experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organisation, 2024). Furthermore, in 2022, Roe V Wade was overturned in America, resulting in the loss of the right to abortion. This regression occurred in spite of the fact that in 2023, Pew Research Center found that 60% of Americans believe abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances. Given these statistics, it can be observed that even though public opinion of gender has – in the majority – evolved to be in favour of equality, a lack of women in government, as well as a rise in violence and extremism among the right, particularly in young men and the emergence of ideologies such as Inceldom in recent years, contribute to an increasing hostility towards marginalised groups (Adams, 2020). From this, it can be concluded that gender relationships are not always moving towards equality, but rather the progress made is constantly being threatened, whether that be through the disproportionate ruling men have over legislation, or the new wave of radicalisation through the Internet that labels women as inferior.

Overall, it is crucial that historians use their knowledge of previous instances of political extremism and social instability to be able to observe and predict the affect that the current age of uncertainty and growing hostility will have on gender relationships. For

example, Nazi policy, particularly regarding women and their place in the household is currently being reflected in some of the proposals put forward for the second term of the Trump administration – Project 2025 – suggesting that there should be a ‘biblically based, social science-reinforced definition of marriage and family’ (Wendling, 2024). This, along with the many other examples provided, illustrates that traditional values, political, social and religious, continue to influence how men and women operate and interact, despite some considering them as outdated. Having seen the term ‘witch hunt’, first used in the trials of women accused of satanism, now refer to the attack on individuals, often still women, who don’t align with society’s perception of what is right, and the reversal of the abortion rights women in America previously had fought to achieve, with many states now having a total abortion ban, it is clearly conveyed that gender equality is far from being reached, and rights for women are not constantly improving. Rather, the evolution of gender relationships is much more nuanced, and its progression or regression will always be influenced by a range of factors. Therefore, what historians can learn from gender relationships through time was most adequately put by philosopher George Santayana – *‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’*

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