

---

## Women's Influence and Status in Ancient Egyptian Society

**Dr Meenu Sharma**

**Associate Professor of History**

**Govt College Sec 9, Gurugram**

### **Abstract**

In ancient Egyptian society, women held a unique and influential position compared to their counterparts in many other ancient civilizations. However, while often constrained by the patriarchal mores of the time, Egyptian women enjoyed far more rights and privileges in terms of law, social, and economic concerns. As a female, they could own property, did business transactions, inherited wealth and initiated legal proceedings. They also obtained a measure of autonomy in marriage and family roles — women could divorce, widows or daughters could inherit estates from which male heirs were absent. Not only did religion elevate the role of women further, goddesses were represented in important aspects of life and spirituality and priestesses served in temples alongside male clergy. However, some women even rose to positions of power, as pharaohs, including Hatshepsut and Cleopatra. All this went toward a coexistence of many roles for women as mothers, wives, priestesses and occasionally as rulers. In religious, economic, and political domains, their presence indicates a not fully egalitarian but a society both aware of, and respectful of, women's contributions and agency. This study reveals the complexity and flexibility of gender roles in ancient Egypt through an examination of the roles of women in that society.

### **Introduction**

Women played a surprisingly distinct and influential role in ancient Egyptian society, separate from women of many other cultures from that time. Women possessed under its social structure a range of rights and privileges that were rare in antiquity, and which was reinforced by Egypt's own ritual practices; and that gave them a level of rights which was closer to the equality with men than was usual in neighbouring cultures. In contrast to Greek and Roman women, who were denied great liberty in public and economic life, Egyptian women could own property, inherit wealth and transact on business terms without a man. And most importantly they could take and contest legal actions enabling them to become part actors in both the private and public spheres.

---

---

The relative freedom expressed must have been a product of a society which prized stability, continuity of family, and social harmony, for both men and women were seen as key to the social fabric.

The Egyptians had such a strong family life built into their culture that women were a big part of Egyptian life as wives, mothers and caregivers. It was considered a matter of vital contribution to society and they were responsible for managing the households and raising children. In marriage generally the basis was mutual respect and partnership, and the women continued to possess their own property rights. They could claim financial support in cases of divorce, as opposed to the laws of many other ancient societies, which were far more retrograde. In the case of no male heirs estates were also inherited by widows and daughters, which reinforced the social and economic status of the widow or daughter.

Elevation of women's influence in Egyptian society also had something to do with religion. Isis, Hathor, Ma'at were venerated goddesses, principles of love and justice and balance. Priestesses of women could be professionally involved in temples, that is, they were participating in ritual, community and religious administration thereby increasing their status within the society. To boot, a handful even ascended to the mountaintop power, pharaohing it as Hatshepsut and Cleopatra did, making not only that female leadership was possible but possible at its highest.

Ancient Egypt was a diverse community of hierarchal, patriarchal men and women who not only occupied an array of complex roles, but also recognized women's contributions to their society across a myriad of social, religious, and economic aspects of their community, a more balanced perspective on gender roles in antiquity which is more often than not distorted by the way figures like Cleopatra are portrayed today.

### **Women & Religion**

Religion in ancient Egyptian society granted women special opportunities for influence as well as respect, in part, because of the large role women played in the religion of Egypt. They were attached closely to revered goddesses like Isis, Hathor, Ma'at, whose attributes help shape the nature of femininity for women and power and the realization of virtue in society. Egypt's beloved

---

---

goddess of motherhood, magic and protection was Isis who was symbolised by fidelity, wisdom, and nurturing power. Love, music, and joy are that which Hathor symbolized; beauty, maternal care, creativity; that is as Ma'at herself: truth, balance, and cosmic order. By centering these goddesses for their roles and qualities of women, which rendered sacredness around them and thereby elevated the woman's roles within the household and religious perspectives.



Many women were priests or priestesses in temples devoted to female deities and they participated actively in religious life. Priestesses led worship, presided over critical rituals, and helped manage temple resources earning them both respect and authority under the eyes of their communities. Temples serving Hathor at Dendera or Isis at Philae were centers of practiced female religious activities; priestesses were considered pregnant and this was true also for the temple daily and festival rites. Some priestesses were not only religious duty, but also served as musicians, dancers, oracles, which priests were said to be gods that gave messages to them. They had these roles that provided them with a public presence and influence on this country, which was a reflection of their integration, as women, into Egypt's religious and cultural life.

High priestesses wielded even more power and high ranking women did actually take part in political affairs. For example, high priestesses of Amun often took part in the appointment of officials, controlled significant temple wealth, and acted essentially in the position of state officials. In this position, women had a reach out to impact religion and governance that is surely very rare for any woman in any ancient civilization. A society, albeit patriarchal, that was united

---

---

with its religion and interwove the female experiences with it in its spiritual practices where it conferred on women an important role. The Egyptian woman's association with divine qualities and religious authority provided her with a unique position of respect and also autonomy giving it a central role in her and the maintenance of spiritual and social harmony in ancient Egypt.

### **Significance of the study**

Women's influence and status in ancient Egyptian society is a study in how a civilization granted women a level of legal rights, religious importance, and social agency that was unusual for its time. Through a discussion of women's economic role as property owners, priestesses, mothers, wives, and on rare occasion's mothers and rulers, this study demonstrates the varied nature of gender interaction in ancient Egypt and considers it progressive at times. Unlike most contemporary societies, the Egyptian legal system gave women an autonomy in matters of property ownership, inheritance and representation, which helped to illuminate two unique features in Egyptian society: women were not reduced solely to the domestic arena but rather were valued for their contributions outside the domestic sphere. The status of goddesses and the roles of priestesses are also testament to the respect paid to women in spiritual practices at which they held power and authority.

Aspects of studying these things help us better understand the context of ancient Egyptian culture while also challenging assumptions about gender and antiquity that are quite outdated in modern concepts of gender dynamics. Additionally, the accomplishments of well-known women figures such as Hatshepsut and Cleopatra demonstrate that women are still capable of being leaders and resilient within the male dominated system. Through this exploration of women's multi-dimensional roles in ancient Egypt we gain a richer picture of their efforts to maintain societal stability and religious life and to govern as these efforts have reverberated throughout history and other cultures.

### **Overview of the distinct status of women in ancient Egyptian society**

In comparison with other ancient civilizations, ancient Egyptian society gave women the status largely unique to them, independent, respected and legally empowered. Unlike in many patriarchal

---

---

societies of its time, Egyptian women were legally recognized as a person in place of the person not merely alternative to their husbands or male family members. This wave of autonomy gave women in Egypt the right to own, inherit and manage property by themselves and deal with business without having to get in touch with males. A woman, whether married or widowed, or single, had the power to buy and sell land, to hire workers, to engage in trade on an equivalent level, and that implied a great economic freedom.

Under the Egyptian legal system, women were able to initiate lawsuits and sign contracts and represent themselves in court. These rights were not diminished by marriage; rather they were structured as a partnership in which each person held his or her own property right. That meant that married women could still keep hold of their own money independently of what their husbands had, which was especially progressive at the time. Although divorce was relatively rare, women who could claim financial support upon separation discovered that a society with a evident regard for their welfare and security did exist.

And women's roles included those in the religious and cultural spheres, as well, allowing them to gain even higher status. Isis and Hathor were powerful goddesses, representing essential social values and making women seem nurturing and protective, but strong. Amongst religious practices, women also held priestesses accounting to their influence in religious practices and this increased their societal respect. A balanced approach of gender roles demonstrated by the unique status of women in Egypt with legal rights, economic independence and cultural influence. Egyptian society was hierarchical, and to a large extent patriarchal, but women were granted a lot of respect and agency, unique in the ancient world.

### **Family Structure and Marriage**

### **Social Structure and Familial Roles in Ancient Egypt**

In the ancient Egypt, the social structure was very complex and stratified, while it also recognized the integral roles of both men and women in the family unit and society as a whole. For Egypt the family was at the center of society, a richly held pillar of stability, continuity, and prosperity. It was a very highly valued and respected role to see the women as the ones that kept the household,

---

---

that would nurture in the children, and in doing so, bring the family well. Egyptian women were allowed a role beyond the confines of the domestic domain and they could economically as well as legally contribute as widows, or in the absence of a male head of the family. Real articles of faith in their cultural pantheon, those women who served as mothers and caregivers were imbued with their cultural role in fostering familial harmony as the key to a balanced life.

Within this social framework, marriage was a vital institution that was not only a personal partnership but constituted a social arrangement that preserved the family line. The assumption was that each spouse would contribute towards success of the household and reliance on the dynamic of mutual respect was imperative. In addition to that, in family relations, both men and women had individual rights, while women possessed the right to dispose of their own property and financial resources. This social structure focused on the average view of gender roles—women, being respected for their contribution in nurturing and saving family and social harmony.

### **Marriage Dynamics: Mutual Respect and Property Rights within Marriage**

In ancient Egypt, marriage was usually characterized by mutual respect and partnership, both of which contributed to the very foundation of the family and the society. And Egyptian marriage was often a personal choice, a matter of personal taste rather than a formalized or state mandated contract or transaction where love, companionship and family continuity was the reason for couples to come together. Preservation of property rights for both partners was a unique feature of Egyptian marriage. It was rare even amongst other ancient civilizations that women and women body remained under control even after they got married. This legal independence gave women the ability to maintain their own assets, thus creating personal autonomy within marriage.

Within the home men and women had duties to perform and husbands and wives each took responsibility for their respective duties. Many women though engaged in businesses or managed estates helping the family prosper. The Egyptians saw marriage as a bond with both partners equally contributing, and the contributions of the two were valued and respected. The rights and obligations of both parties in relationship property and financial contracts were commonly described in marital contracts. In his cases on divorce, these contracts evidence not only the

---



---

woman's prerogative to continue to possess her assets and take suitable financial support from her husband, but they provide proof of a progressive approach to ensuring the economic security of women in marriage. The Egyptian view of marriage was also one of marriage that was based on mutual contribution and respect and fairness, which is shown in this respect for the individual rights and mutual contribution of marriage.

### **Divorce Rights and the Financial Security of Women Post-Divorce**

In ancient Egypt, marriage was honoured, often in a lifelong partnership, but that also meant that if a marriage failed, divorce was acceptable and available. Divorce was initiated by the Egyptian women as a freedom not as common as similar in many ancient societies. Earl Amos: Divorce in Egypt was not stigmatized; it was a legal and social solution to a marriage that did not meet either partner's expectations or needs. Marriage contracts and Egyptian laws which emphasized fairness, support of women in a divorce, protected women's rights in marriage.

When a marriage broke up, women were guaranteed to retain control over their personal property, this being the only property they owned. Furthermore, a separating woman would be entitled to ask her former husband to support or make compensation up so she does not remain destitute upon separation. This is a particularly important provision in that particular society, where independence and stability meant so much, because it provided divorced women the means to be independent and to take care of themselves or their children without threat of becoming a burden to the family. It highlights Egypt's establishment of women's rights and their contribution in family structure.

In fact divorce rights also prevailed in child custody aspects wherein the welfare of the children was paramount. In many cases, women were able to retain custody, especially of young children, because the Egyptians believed a mother had a pivotal role in child rearing. Ancient Egypt's approach to divorce presents a forward thinking legal and social framework, in that women were guaranteed their autonomy and dignity and in relationship to with their financial security. By means of a supportive legal system, Egyptian society was also advanced in its understanding of

---

marital and familial balance, which offered women a degree of security which was unusual in the ancient world.

### **Religious Roles and Spiritual Influence**

Religion was central in ancient Egyptian society and social norms and perceptions were created by it, with goddesses and the female who worked in the capacity of religion very influential on the status or so of women. Strong, fertile, protective and cosmic order beings in goddess form, such as Isis, Hathor and Ma'at, are powerful symbols of societal harmony and very much part of daily life. One of the most well-known figures worshipped was Isis, goddess of motherhood and magic, known for her dedication, wisdom and the tenderness she exerted on all who came close to her. Beauty, and maternal care was associated with the goddess Hathor, who represented love, music and joy, whilst Ma'at stood for truth, balance and justice, representing a corner stone for Egyptian ethics, and cosmic order. Societal perception of women was affected by the veneration of these goddesses in that women were seen to be nurturing and powerful, thereby increasing their status in cultural and spiritual landscape.

Women's religious importance was further underscored by the continued role of priestesses, who actively participated in temple ceremonies and in providing religious administration. Sometimes, these priestesses would lead in worship, perform sacred rites, and run temple resources which were influential roles within the community. In temples dedicated to female deities, priestesses figure centrally: at Dendera, for example, where the cult of Hathor was practiced; or at Philae, where that of Isis was celebrated, where priestesses performed crucial rituals in honour and through which to convey the divine attributes of the goddess. Since these were religious positions, women could freely offer their votes and maintain a solemn existence in society's spiritual life with authority and respect. Some were also musicians, dancers, or oracles who claimed to be able to transfer what the gods were telling them to the followers.

Societal respect for women was deeply religion influenced, making women sought and revered, sacred and wise and essential to both the spiritual and earthly. The same reverence carried over into the home, with women regarded as the keepers of family unity and goddesses such as Isis to whom attributed divine qualities. By describing women as valuable members of society, essential

---



---

to the moral and spiritual wellbeing of Egypt, women's participation in religious life helped perpetuate the idea that they were actual people to be respected. Some even obtained that prominence of high priestesses, with an amount of religious authority. Both high priestesses, including those serving in the cult of Amun, and also priestesses exercised political power, handled temple wealth, and were sometimes involved in royal affairs. In some respects, their role rivaled that of male priests, and at times placed them very near the pharaoh, to the extent that they were able to affect religious policy and cultural practice. The religious reverence, societal respect, the spiritual influence conferred upon women are unique and powerful sides of Egyptian ancient society in which women played roles and made contributions not only at the household level but also at the level of considerable religious and cultural manifestations.

### **Egyptian Queens & Female Influence**

Egyptian queens and important women of all ranks contributed greatly in political and cultural spheres of ancient Egypt and often fulfilled prominent positions in their own right. Egypt had a patriarchal society, yet kings had consorts and later queens as idealized, but powerful, 'pharaohs without the crowns'. The title 'Great Royal Wife' was held by many queens, an indication that many were important for royal lineage, but also as co-regent and co-religionist. For example, Queens such as Nefertiti were directly involved with state affairs and the religious reforms alongside their pharaoh husbands. If she was intelligent, she was stupid for not noticing her words would reveal her weakness! Her idiocy supported her husband, Akhenaten, as together they introduced a radical radical religious turn to monotheism that centered around the worship of Aten, the sun disk.



There were a number of women who rose to be pharaohs in their own right, and not only to the point that traditional gender roles kept them from holding the highest position in the land. Queen Hatshepsut is one of the most well known examples who ruled Egypt for more than two decades during the New Kingdom. She posed in traditional male regalia, donned the pharaonic beard, and legitimized her rule by generations of military campaigns and ambitious building projects and by trading Egypt's way into success. She is considered one of the most prosperous periods in Egyptian history, and it highlights the capability and authority women could hold in society like this.

Other iconic female rulers were Cleopatra VII, the pious 'tamer of men', who adroitly manipulated the intricacies of the political climate of her time relying on strategic alliances with Rome to keep Egypt independent. Her linguistic skills, her intelligence, her diplomatic acumen all made for a founding legend in both Egyptian and Roman history. Cleopatra's rule is the end of the Ptolemaic Dynasty and testament to the strength of women power during a period of such upheaval.

Royal women bore titles and responsibilities that had power outside of the queen's palace. The office of "God's Wife of Amun," for instance, was a powerful religious office held by queens or royal women, giving them economic control over temple wealth and authority over spiritual matters. Egyptian Queens and royal women throughout history had immense influence through

---

---

these roles that they helped shape the realm's policies, culture and international relationships. The women in ancient Egypt did not have to 'struggle for respect and get it begrudgingly' because their legacies demonstrate that women were invested in the stability, prosperity and spiritual wellbeing of the nation and were held in respected positions.

### **Research Problem**

The research problem lies with the matter of why and how did women have different and unique rights, responsibilities, and influence within an ancient Egyptian society than women in other ancient civilizations. Although ancient Egypt was largely a patriarchal society, women could own property, commence legal actions, trade and even rule as pharaohs, all three of which were either unknown in other contemporaneous societies (such as ancient Greece or Rome) or exceedingly rare. This presents a complex and intriguing subject: how much did cultural, religious and social structures serve to elevate the status of women compared to men. Finally, while historical records, temple inscriptions, and legal documents contain evidence of this, its interpretation is greatly complicated by the fact that it was written from a male perspective or from some kind of political or religious standpoint of its time. Research seeks to clarify the exact roles and legal rights of women, examine why such religious beliefs had reverence to goddesses and women served as priestesses, and the impact of the more prominent female figures on Egypt's political landscape. This study addresses these areas in order to understand the ways by which Egyptian women navigated through the multiple circuits of influence and broader implications of these roles on the ancient Egyptian society. In the end, however, the research problem focuses on a need to understand gender dynamics and society in ancient Egypt in their totality.

### **Conclusion**

Women in ancient Egyptian society were a highly influential and important group, something which was far less true of women in other ancient civilizations. Although Egyptian society was patriarchal, women were extremely important in Egyptian society, and within its family structure, in legal, economic, and religious spheres, all of which were highly respected. Women could own, inherit and run property of their own, and often worked along men in trade or in family

---

businesses. Women were legally equal with men in Egypt, and were allowed to represent themselves in the courts of law and enter into contracts.

The respect for women in ancient Egypt was further strengthened by the religious and mythological framework itself. Isis and Hathor were chief goddesses, representing power, fertility, and wisdom, models of strength and to be revered by Egyptian women. Like many cultures of the ancient world, royal women had great influence, often co-ruling with pharaohs, and occasionally ruling on their own. Hatshepsut and Nefertiti are the kind of figures who show us the heights at which a woman could rise to power. Social norms did, as well, show a measure of respect for women, who were considered important to the stability and continuation of the household. Respect and acquisition of love for one another were a bait for marriage; divorce was permitted and emphasised the principle of personal preference and equality. The rights and roles afforded to Egyptian women were extraordinary for the time and although there were limitations they were existent. This unique status of women in ancient Egypt highlights a society that despite its hierarchies knew, valued, and honored the diverse and numerous roles played by women in public and private life.

## References

1. Watterson, B. (2011). *Women in ancient Egypt*. Amberley Publishing Limited.
2. Olivier, A. (2008). *Social status of elite women of the New Kingdom of ancient Egypt: A comparison of artistic features* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa).
3. Graves-Brown, C. (2010). *Dancing for Hathor: women in ancient Egypt*. A&C Black.
4. Bagnall, R., & Cribiore, R. (2015). *Women's letters from ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800*. University of Michigan Press.
5. Halim, W. (2015). Islam and Its Impact on Women's Status and Role in Egypt. *JICSA (Journal of Islamic Civilization in Southeast Asia)*, 4(2).
6. McGinnis, M. P. (2012). *Maidens, matrons, and magicians: women and personal ritual power in late antique Egypt*.
7. Li, J. (2010). *Elite Theban women of the eighth-sixth centuries BCE in Egypt: Identity, status and mortuary practice*. University of California, Berkeley.
8. Pomeroy, S. B. (Ed.). (2014). *Women's history and ancient history*. UNC Press Books.
9. Dean, R. A., & Phil, M. (2013). *Women, weaponry and warfare*. *Archaeology*.
10. El-gousi, H. S. E. D. A. (2010). *Women's rights in Islam and contemporary Ulama: Limitations and constraints. (Egypt as case study)* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds).
11. Dalal, K., Lawoko, S., & Jansson, B. (2010). Women's attitudes towards discontinuation of female genital mutilation in Egypt. *Journal of injury and violence research*, 2(1), 41.
12. Wilfong, T. G. (2010). *An Ancient Egyptian Woman: In Life, Afterlife, and the Modern World*.