

# Women Through History

## By Kaitlyn Sexton

### Why Study Women's History

Studying women's history is a way to give a voice to women in the past. Until the last few decades, those who studied history were mainly concerned with the big events in the past, with the leaders, the wars, and how forms of government evolved. What were mostly overlooked were the everyday things in life. How did people live their everyday lives and what made the home that they were fighting for in all those wars so important to them? Over the last few decades, historians have been filling in those gaps and looking for sources that had been mostly ignored before this. In the past, historians generally considered diaries and letters from women important only if they contained information about a famous person or important event. Now their journals and letters are being read because of the information they contain about the everyday lives of people in the past.

Studying women's history can lead to the discovery of many little-known parts of the past. Many people have at least some knowledge about the Civil War, but did you know that women fought in the Civil War? Many people have heard of the Viking Sagas that tell about their settlement in the new world, but did you know that a woman was part of the Viking settlement at Vinland?

Reading the words that women in the past have written show us how real women reacted to their circumstances, as well as revealing many details of their everyday lives. Included below are some writings from women in different times and places as a sample of the kinds of things we will be using.

"Returning to Mrs. Lincoln's room, I found her in a new paroxysm of grief. Robert was bending over his mother with tender affection, and little Tad was crouched at the foot of the bed with a world of agony in his young face. I shall never forget the scene – the wails of a broken heart, the unearthly shrieks, the terrible convulsions, the wild, tempestuous outbursts of grief from the soul. I bathed Mrs. Lincoln's head with cold water, and soothed the terrible tornado as best I could. Tad's grief at his father's death was as great as the grief of his mother, but her terrible outbursts awed the boy into silence. Sometimes he would throw his arms around her neck, and exclaim, between his broken sobs, "Don't cry so, Mamma! don't cry, or you will make me cry, too! You will break my heart." - from Elizabeth Keckly's book *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. Elizabeth Keckly was a former slave who became a dressmaker and confidante of Mary Todd Lincoln

"A really nice day and I have washed and dried all the flannels. I have been alone with the exception of Fred, who of all people on earth, is the best one

to be with. One cannot be lonesome. Every few minutes a flock of little brown birds alights by the door. They have tippits that look like swan's-down around their necks, which are white. They look lovely to me. Dear little birds, how can they live through the Dakota winters! I have had no eggs this winter and my cakes have been failures. This morning I hunted up Katie's receipts, and threw my old brains out of the window, and made a coffee cake.

Walter came home early, before I had to begin to look for him – the first time that ever happened. A little later Nora McAuliffe and Johnny came. Fred played them a tune, but the little boy had never heard music before and hid his face in his sister's gown. The McAuliffe's, our nearest neighbors, are a very intelligent family, and we exchange much reading with them. We furnish reading to our German neighbors, the Lessings, who never had any before. I am reading Jane Welsh Carlyle's *Letters*. My diary is a great deal of company for me and I like to write in it. Besides, it lets me do all the talking." - written by Mary Dodge Woodward, who lived with her grown children on a wheat farm in the Dakota Territory in the 1880's. Her diary was published as *The Checkered Years: A Bonanza Farm Diary, 1884-88*

"In the name of the Holy Trinity, here begins the handbook of Dhuoda, which she sent to her son William.

I am well aware that most women rejoice that they are with their children in this world, but I, Dhuoda, am far away from you, my son William. For this reason I am anxious and filled with longing to do something for you. So I send you this little work written down in my name, that you may read it for your education, as a kind of mirror. And I rejoice that, even if I am apart from you in body, the little book before you may remind you, when you read it, of what you should do on my behalf." - written by Dhuoda, a ninth-century noblewoman, married to a high-ranking official in the kingdom of the Franks. Her husband, for reasons that are not entirely clear, was keeping her away from her sons, so she wrote a little book of advice and moral teachings for her older son.

Unfortunately, many women left behind no firsthand accounts of their lives, so we have to rely on other sources to find out as much as we can about their lives. The farther back in the past we go, the more we have to rely on sources such as archaeology and official documents to get an idea of what was happening. There is also more information available for women of higher social classes. More men at the time wrote about wealthier women, even if the women of the time couldn't write, and they also show up more in official documents. Poor women leave very little records, even in the more recent past. We can only speculate what these women would have had to say about their lives.

**Suggested Further Reading:**

*Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

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### Women of the Far East in Ancient Societies

Although China has been the dominant culture in much of Asia for centuries, other cultures have maintained distinctive aspects of their own culture, even while being strongly influenced by China. Unfortunately, the volume of women's history in Asia that has been studied is still much smaller than what has been learned about Europe and North America, so there are still many things that we do not know.

One characteristic of most families in cultures found in southeast Asia is that the family was often a wider group of relatives than we would usually have involved in our lives now, and that the family played a larger role than we are used to in many life decisions. They had influence over who and when you would marry, your education, and if your behavior was acceptable (and if not, what your punishment would be). During this time, both age and gender were factors in how much influence a person had in their family. Age was respected, but women were not as respected as men. It was still possible that an older woman would have influence over the decisions of a younger man in her family.

At this time, many marriages were monogamous, but some men had more than one wife as a sign of their financial status and power in their community. The children of these marriages often took the status of their father, so even if they were born to a slave mother, they were still considered free, although they had a lower social status than children of a mother from a wealthy and powerful family.

Take a look at this [map of the Eastern Hemisphere in 1300 BC](#).

### Korea

In early Korean culture, women dominated shamanic traditions, as they do in certain belief systems today. A Korean shamaness, or *mudang* was believed to ward off dangerous influences. She was also responsible for promoting health and general welfare, on behalf of both the community and individuals. These duties made her a significant local figure, although her areas of leadership were in what were traditionally considered women's roles, such as cleaning-purifying households and villages; caring and comforting through exorcising ill-causing spirits; and helping to ease the passage of the deceased. Tombs of women rulers have been found. Scholars believe that women were more accepted as rulers in Korean culture because their shamanic roles were such an important part of life.

In one case, a woman appears to have been the spiritual leader, with her husband perhaps in charge of military duties.

While much of Korean culture was influenced by China, there were some areas of contrast. Some historical texts show that men and women were freer to gather in groups together for singing and dancing. Both higher and lower classes also valued love matches.

### Vietnam

Culture on the peninsula of Vietnam was influenced by both China and India because of the trade routes between the two that ran across it. Although there was more Chinese influence to the north, in general Vietnamese culture was more similar to that of India, allowing women a higher status than they had in China. They also had rights to property, and to inherit.

As a result of their economic dependence on water-rice agriculture, they worshipped many female nature deities, among other gods, prior to the introduction of Theravada Buddhism from India. After this time, there were some areas that worshipped female “Buddhas”, despite the fact that the Theravada doctrine’s forbid this practice.

### India

The known story of women in India begins with the Indus Valley civilization, which existed from approximately 2500 to 1500 BC. The Indus Valley people had at least two major urban centers, Mohenjo Daro and Harrapa, as well as smaller villages. Both were walled cities with well laid out streets. Some of the artifacts of this civilization imply that they valued families and children. These include images of men and women holding children, bird-shaped whistles, small toy carts, and terra-cotta monkeys on a string. Some figurines found also suggest that women goddesses were worshiped in connection with fertility for vegetation and crops. Archaeological evidence shows that while the population was generally healthy, females had a higher rate of dental problems, most likely due to dietary differences from males, as well as more nutritional stress as they were growing than boys had.

Look at this [map of the Indus Valley civilization](#).

The end of the Indus Valley civilization coincides with the arrival of nomadic people into the Indus Valley, along with their religious texts called the Vedas. Their priests, the Brahmins, were in charge of carrying out the requirements of their religion, as well as being the leading social class. Prior to

the Vedic texts, religious texts (written about 1500 BC) describe the worship of goddesses, as well as focusing on marriage and family issues for human women.

As time went on, the role of women in religion became more restricted, and the ideal woman in the texts became one who was submissive and focused on the home. Among the 1,028 hymns in the Veda, three appear to have been written by women. Although later Vedic traditions said that women should not read the Vedas or perform Vedic rituals, these early stories show that in the past women both read the Vedas and performed the rituals themselves.

One of the hymns of the Rig Veda refers to a woman's "right to speak to the gathered people," which some scholars interpret to mean that women were allowed to speak in public, possibly in a political sense. Another hymn refers to a wife's voice being supreme in her husband's ears, as well as saying how clever she is, and how successful her children are.

In religious texts written in approximately 800-600 BC, called the Upanishads, references are made to two learned women, Maitreyi and Gargi. These women engage in public theological debates. The fact that this is not explained as being unusual suggests that women were doing this at that time. Although there are also legal texts that mention study of the Vedas as an alternative to marriage for women, some scholars dismiss this as unlikely because as time went on the ideology of Brahmin theology became more restrictive toward women, and men were taking more wives from outside cultures who were not allowed to study the Vedas.

Legal texts from around 150 AD, called the *Laws of Manu*, advised that fathers should have their daughters married as soon as possible. The laws also stated that women should be under the guardianship of her father, followed by her husband, and then her sons if she was widowed. Women were not thought to be worthy of being independent. According to the texts, women's roles were to bear children and take care of their homes. Women were given as "gifts" to their husband's family, so that they could provide children to continue the family, as well as take care of his home, and make him an adult member of society, capable of fulfilling his religious obligations.

The legal texts did permit divorce under certain circumstances, for both men and women. Men were allowed to divorce a woman if she was barren (unable to have children), but only after eight years of marriage. He could also divorce her after eleven years if she had only daughters. If a man divorced a woman for these reasons, she was allowed to keep property given to her by her family, which was often jewelry. Other causes for divorce were if she drank wine, if she was rebellious or dishonest, or if she wasted his money. Women could divorce their husbands if he did not return from a journey after five to eight years, or if he left to become a religious beggar. Unlike in some cultures, widows were not encouraged to remarry, and adoption of sons to continue the family line was also discouraged, although in some cases widows were made to marry their husband's brother. This was because the bloodline was seen as very

important, so adopted children would not have been considered part of the bloodline. Widows were told that by living chaste and austere lives, they would join their husbands in the afterlife. In order to avoid attracting the attention of other men, widows were to give their jewelry to their daughters and dress in plain white clothes, as well as shaving their heads. Daughters were allowed to inherit some of their father's property, or all of it if there were no sons, to pass down to their sons.

In contrast to the submissive women in the legal and religious texts, the stories told by the common people that were eventually written down as epics show a more capable, independent view of women. In the *Mahabharata*, Sulabha engages in a public debate over the superiority of life as an ascetic. Draupadi is not only one of multiple wives, but also has multiple husbands herself. She also defends herself against an attacker and saves her husbands from slavery as a result of a gambling debt.

Around the 100 BC to 250 AD, Indian women's voices are first heard in history. Over 2,000 Tamil poems are collected in anthologies, and more than 150 of them were written by women. The Tamil region is in the southern tip of India. The experiences of upper class women in the poetry are centered around home and family, but those of the lower classes show a wider range of experiences. One poem, written by Peyanar, shows the bond between a foster mother and her child.

"The way  
they lay together  
like deer, mother-doe;  
and fawn,  
with their boy  
between them, was very sweet:  
neither in this world  
hugged by the wide blue sea  
nor in the one above  
is such a thing easy to get." 1

Another poem mourns the loss of their father by Pari's daughters.

"That month  
in that white moonlight  
we had our father,  
and no one  
could take that hill.  
This month  
in this white moonlight,  
kings with drums

drumming victory  
have taken over the hill,  
and we have no father." 2

These poems show the love families had for one another, despite living in a period of instability and warring kingdoms.

### **Further Reading**

*Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present, Volume 1: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century*- Susie Tharu

### **Sources for Quotes**

1. A.K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p.84.
2. *Ibid.*, p.145