

Human societies have changed more in the 20th and 21st centuries than in the previous 5,000 years of civilization. Certain laws and customs that seemed impervious to change over most of that period have evolved. One of them was the status of women, who formerly were the property of fathers, husbands, and sons.

There were exceptions, of course: female leaders: queens and empresses, and in later European society, rich widows. There were also improvements among the upper classes in Europe to treat women as partners rather than as chattel. For example, when aristocratic men left their homes to fight the Crusades (1099-1250), they left their wives in charge of running their complex estates, including responsibility for defense.

There were other exceptions as well, when married couples actually loved each other. However, wife battery was the norm in the world, with death sentences for infidelity, not a requirement for men.

However, even in generally better treatment of women in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, men and their religions and laws mandated the inherent inferiority of women. It was believed (often by women themselves) that they needed care. Almost all occupations that could support them were forbidden, except the near-slave labor of servant women, and toward the latter part of the 19th century, factory work and sweatshops.

Women. Probably the most world-improving change in the 20th century was the women's suffrage movement that gave women legal equality to men. They could vote. They could attend universities, medical, and law schools (this started in the 19th century). And the simultaneous invention of contraception for women, in theory at least, removed the largest impediment to women's equality. Having control over their own bodies inflamed much pushback, a relentless battle that we still have with us, promoted by conservative religions and conservative law courts.

In lesser educated and more religious societies around the world, there is still fierce pushback against the idea that women are equal to men in rights and law. But these movements are on a losing trajectory, even in the most regressive of countries (primarily Muslim majority).

Children. Children's lives have also changed enormously. They are no longer "property" of their fathers. Modern child-rearing is now the responsibility for the health and education of children. Child labor is illegal in the modern world (with the exception of the uneducated parts of Africa, India, and Pakistan. Child beating is illegal too: an enormous change from even Abraham Lincoln's childhood when child whipping was common and his father could farm him out for labor and confiscate his earnings. Lincoln bitterly remembered this.

The Handicapped. Until the 20th century, it was common practice for the wealthy to hide and farm-out children with major handicaps. In the rest of the world, such children were employed as beggars, their earnings to go to their parents. Today, medical science and social sciences have progressed enough to ameliorate some of the birth handicaps and a much more compassionate public culture has changed how the public regards mental and physical handicaps. None of this is so in the societies under conservative religious rule.

Slavery. Slavery is one of the oldest human systems since the beginnings of civilization (towns and cities). Warfare provided the opportunity to enslave men and women for difficult labor (mining, farming, servants to the upper classes, and sexual slavery. However, through much of history, there were mechanisms for male slaves to secure their freedom: legal emancipation, buying their freedom (Rome), or flight. This worked when slaves were indistinguishable in race from the free.

With the discovery of the New World, this no longer applied. Abducted Africans, who came from societies that enslaved each other, faced the worst conditions in the long history of slavery. Their racial difference from their owners made it difficult to flee.

Laws, religion, and custom cemented their plight, a disadvantage that has continued even after emancipation. However, thanks to American and British leadership, the institution of slavery was finally made illegal for the first time in human history.

Despite pushback, the world is much improved over its past. This is Western Civilization's gift to the world.

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