Evolution of Women's Issues

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The rights and status of women has been one of the most prevalent social issues throughout world history. Women have faced both constant and changing issues across Western civilizations and time periods, such as the Byzantine Empire, 14th century France, and 16th century England. These issues become evident when examining historical texts created by women, such as *The Alexiad* by Anna Comnena, *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pisan, and the *Speech to the Troops at Tilbury* by Queen Elizabeth I. Many issues that women have dealt with throughout different time periods and geographical locations share more similarities than differences, including their right to be educated, their influence in government, and their social status relative to men. While progress has been made to combat these issues, they have continued to limit women's rights throughout history.

Women's rights to education have varied throughout different time periods and locations. For example, women were not allowed to be educated in ancient Athens, but ancient Spartan girls were allowed to be educated. The ability of women to be educated also differed between social classes, such as in 14th century France, where Christine de Pisan, the daughter of a court physician of King Charles VI of France, was educated in a society where education was usually reserved for upper class men.[1] In addition to being uneducated, women in history usually had far fewer career opportunities than men. In 14th century France, this even applied to traditionally feminine professions such as hospitality and baking bread. The workforce was very male dominated, even in professions considered "women's work," according to the Journal of Women's History. Despite women's work generally being considered a lower priority than men's jobs, "…men came to the city to better their lives and to do so might have meant taking

[1] Christine de Pisan, "The Book of the City of Ladies," in *Perspectives from the Past,* James Brophy, Joshua Cole, John Robertson, Thomas Max Safley, and Carol Symes (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 383.

over 'women's jobs.'"[2] While this practice served to benefit immigrant men, it provided the local women with even fewer job opportunities and resulted in very low percentages of female employment. Women's rights have been similarly suppressed with regards to their voice—or lack thereof—in government.

Historically, it has often occurred that in government, the only women with power were the ones at the top—monarchs or women who exercised influence over male leaders. According to the Journal of Women's History, female subjects in 14th century France had many of the same basic rights as male citizens, except that they were unable to vote or hold public office.[3] This remains true of women's role in politics for much of history. As such, it was near impossible for women to gain political power in most places and time periods. The notable exceptions to this rule are female monarchs—such as Hatshepsut and Cleopatra VII of ancient Egypt as well as Queen Elizabeth I of 16th century England—and women who were not formal leaders but had strong influence over their male leaders, such as the empresses of Alexios I Komnenos of Byzantium. However, the respect shown to female leaders was different than that shown to their male counterparts. In her Speech to the Troops at Tilbury, Queen Elizabeth I states that she has "… the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king…"[4] In order to command her troops, Elizabeth feels the need to not only acknowledge the weaknesses that society at large associates with her gender, but to go on to compare herself to a man as if this is what makes her worthy of their respect, rather than her leadership skills alone.[5] In ancient

[2] Joëlle Rollo-Koster, "The Women of Papal Avignon. A New Source: The Liber Divisionis of 1371," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 48.
[3] Joëlle Rollo-Koster, "The Women of Papal Avignon. A New Source: The Liber Divisionis of 1371," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 43.
[4] Elizabeth I, "Speech to the Troops at Tilbury," in *Perspectives from the Past,* James Brophy, Joshua Cole, John Robertson, Thomas Max Safley, and Carol Symes (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 505.
[5] James Daybell, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 1 (2010): 50.

Byzantium, Alexios I Komnenos was extremely reliant on his mother, Anna Dalassena, to govern his empire. In fact, Alexios's daughter, Anna Comnena, states it in The Alexiad that "…only in the title of emperor did he share with her the privileges of his rank." Anna Dalassena performed all the duties of an emperor while the title remained with her son.[6] According to Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204, the only title Anna Dalassena was awarded was "despoina," meaning "empress," although the senior empress was Alexios's wife Irene, who exercised considerably less political power than her mother-in-law.[7] This treatment of female leaders in comparison to male leaders is also indicative of the way that lower class women were treated in contrast with their male counterparts.

Throughout Western history, women have almost universally been treated as inferior by men and subject to misogynistic stereotypes. According to Gender, Obedience, & Authority in Women's Letters, when writing to public officials women would frequently refer to themselves using "negative female gender assumptions; female 'weakness,' 'frailty,' 'vulnerability,' and women's intellectual and physical 'inferiority' to men."[8] When compared with Queen Elizabeth's similar remarks in her Speech to the Troops at Tilbury, it is evident that this was the general perception of women in 16th century England.[9] Some women used this point of view to their advantage, describing themselves as vulnerable and inferior to convince men to do them favors.[10] Due to this negative perception, women tended to have limited legal rights in matters

[6] Anna Comnena, "The Alexiad," in *Perspectives from the Past,* James Brophy, Joshua Cole, John Robertson, Thomas Max Safley, and Carol Symes (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 277.
[7] Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 1999), 190.
[8] James Daybell, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 1 (2010): 57.
[9] Elizabeth I, "Speech to the Troops at Tilbury," in *Perspectives from the Past,* James Brophy, Joshua Cole, John Robertson, Thomas Max Safley, and Carol Symes (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 505.
[10] James Daybell, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 1 (2010): 57.

such as inheritance. For example, in French history, women traditionally were not included in their parent's wills. However, in the 14th Century the Black Death resulted in smaller families and therefore fewer male heirs. To keep assets in the family, "… women obtained rights of succession in more than 24 percent of the wills." This change was only temporary, however, as "by the end of the fifteenth century, with the new demographic stability, the practice slowly disappeared."[11] Women were only granted the right to inheritance during a time when it was necessary, and had that right stripped from them as soon as possible.

Women in history have faced many instances of having unequal rights to men throughout Western history. Many of these issues have manifested similarly in different time periods and locations. Limits placed on women's rights to education, influence in government, and property rights have historically had a negative effect on the lives of women. Women's issues, through their persistence and the many lives they have impacted, have proven themselves to be one of the most important social issues in world history.

[11] Joëlle Rollo-Koster, "The Women of Papal Avignon. A New Source: The Liber Divisionis of 1371," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 40.

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