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Changes in the Social Status of Women during Paleolithic and Neolithic Period

**Introduction**

The paleolithic period is characterized as an ancient cultural stage and human development stage. At that time, people usually preferred to live in groups and often choose locations that could be defended easily. Their survival was completely dependent on hunting and collecting nutrients such as plants to eat. During the paleolithic period, both genders had an equal position in society. All chores were equally divided among men and women, which illustrated that the concept of social status was almost not existed. Both genders were responsible to provide food for their families. However, at the beginning of the Neolithic period, inequality between the social status of men and women began to increase. The introduction of agricultural concepts and practice began to change the social status of both men and women. Here, the focus is to indicate various factors that led to the change in women’s status throughout history.

**Discussion**

A critical examination of the paleolithic period is highly necessary to determine the status of women in society. At that period, there was relative equality of sexes as men were responsible for hunting, while women had to gather plants to eat (2). Different roles of men and women in the paleolithic period comprised a hunter-gatherer society. It is important to mention that the woman was a major source of providing food for the family regardless of the fact that hunting seems more glamorous. This can be understood by the fact that meat was difficult to find during the winter and spring months. Therefore, it is obvious that women were the main provider of food for the entire family. However, the distribution of chores among men and women was more or less the same.

It is notable to mention that men were not only responsible for hunting wild animals as they had other chores as well. While women gathered all sorts of things such as nuts and seeds, men were responsible to make clothes with animal fur. They were also responsible to make certain accessories with bones and rocks. Furthermore, narrow stone blades and other such tools were crafted by paleolithic people with the help of ivory and bone. A critical analysis of the paleolithic period indicates that they had no idea about agriculture as they only gathered plants instead of planting them. Moreover, archeologists examined various sculptures of the paleolithic period, which provides a sufficient indication of women's dominance and respect in society. The ‘Venus of Willendorf’ is a sculpture that contains an image of fertility. According to this sculpture, it is indicated that women were given higher status in society. The majority of sculptures of the paleolithic period are women-centric, which demonstrates a dominant society. Also, on the basis of various sculptures in the paleolithic period, historians and archeologists suggested that women had an upper hand regarding social status in society. These sculptures indicated that the paleolithic period was based on a matriarchal system in which women hold primary power positions. At the beginning of the paleolithic period, the social organization of a family was female-centric. Social privilege and moral authority were basic aspects of women living in that period.

Furthermore, the status of women changed in the Paleolithic period where they and their skills and capabilities became more credible and productive. Hence, their status has been changed in the way that became more valued to men than the previous times in that particular period. The status of women got more value because they were only involved in the creation of tools and equipment from the stones. While the changes in their skills and competencies, they started the creation of tools and equipment from metals. Despite this, the contribution of women to the food sources got a hit to almost 80% while only 20% had been filled by the men. Therefore, because of those reasons, women have been valued with more respect, reverence, and admiration as compared to their status in the Neolithic period. Beyond that, almost every woman in society in the Paleolithic period got more patriarchal values and beliefs because of their proper role in society. As well as the number of significant negative relationships with the women has been discouraged and the way of treating women has been changed completely.

With the beginning of the Neolithic period, a significant change has been observed in the agriculture field. The Neolithic period has been characterized as a starting point that changed the social status of men and women. People of the Neolithic period began to practice agriculture instead of just collecting the plants. As per British anthropologist Margaret Ehrenberg, women were considered as the first farmers and originators of the agricultural field (14). It is important to consider the fact that the Neolithic period was the most prominent period in human history as it introduced the concept of agriculture (15). Regardless of the fact that meat has an important source of proteins in the diet, its overall proportion was relatively much less in order to feed the entire family (15). Due to that particular aspect, women had to take care of agriculture. That was a major turning point during that period as the entire responsibility of agriculture fall upon women due to their previous experience in gathering plants and nuts. Regardless of the fact that the role of women and men was equally distributed at the beginning of the Neolithic period, a great emergence of deities began to formulate. Women were given the responsibility to practice on the farm and stayed at the home-front. While men stayed outside their home-front for hunting. During these times, men began to control certain important aspects of society, which ultimately reduced the value and social status of women in society. It has been observed that the entire system of power began to shift into a patriarchal system.

With the passage of time, women were compelled to farming, grinding corn, producing cloths, and spinning and weaving. The discovery of agriculture and duties of childbearing began to revolutionize the role of women in that society. Women began to stay at home to take care of their breastfeeding babies. Another reason why women had to work in farms was the presence of horticultural societies at that time. Women were responsible to make holes by using digging sticks in these societies (16). The surplus of food from agriculture resulted in population growth as people could now reproduce without the fear of food shortage. This ultimately results in more pregnancies and babies, which completely restricted women to their houses. Men began to take charge of everything as women had to stay at home to take care of their babies. These changes in the Neolithic period changed the matriarchal system into a patriarchal system, where men began to dominated major aspects of lives. Neolithic period is considered as one of the earliest periods of human civilization as the small group of bands of hunter-gatherers had transformed into large agricultural settlers.

The Neolithic period had gradually changed every aspect of communities to a significant extent. Crop cultivation and domestication of animals are major aspects of that period. Furthermore, gender roles were not completely defined until the Neolithic period as shores are approximately distributed between men and women. The only thing that matter at that time was survival. Both men and women had shared their time to ensure their survival. However, the arrival of agriculture in the Neolithic period shifted human lifestyle and subsistence. A persistent negative impact of agriculture has been observed over the lives of women in the Neolithic period. It is demonstrated that the social status of women in society had decreased due to the arrival of agriculture. Another way to describe the dominance of men in society can be related to the change in the roles of animals in the Neolithic period (17). Previously, animals were considered only as a source of food for the community. However, with the introduction of agricultural practices, humans began to utilize them for agricultural purposes. Males were responsible to take care of their animals for agriculture, which eventually led them to dominate the agricultural department as well (17).

**Conclusion**

In a nutshell, the roles and social status of women have significantly changed throughout the history of mankind. At the beginning of the Paleolithic period, the concept of social status and class was almost negligible. Men and women almost shared the same status in society due to the equal distribution of various chores. The major priorities of people in the Paleolithic period included food and shelter. Men were responsible for hunting, while women had to gather food from plants. Regardless of that, women enjoyed an appropriate status in society as indicated by various sculptures. The arrival of agricultural practices at the beginning of the Neolithic period began to shift the domination of gender in society. Women had to stay at home to look after their breast-feeding children along with farms. Due to these particular aspects, men began to dominate every influential status in society.