The traditional base

Civilizations and patriarchy

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By the fourth millennium BCE, a number of societies were beginning to move toward that phase of organization called "civilization". While contacts among different groups were virtually as old as the existence of the human species, most early civilizations formed somewhat separately. Mesopotamian civilization, arising after 3500 BCE, thus differed from Egyptian civilization, which emerged soon after in North Africa, not too far to the south. By the fourth millennium BCE also, most agricultural societies had developed new forms of inequality between men and women, in a system often termed patriarchal – with husbands and fathers dominant. Civilizations would usually deepen patriarchy, and at the same time they would define its details in distinctive ways that fitted the wider beliefs and institutions of each individual civilization. In this sense, in putting a particular stamp on patriarchy, each civilization linked gender issues to aspects of their cultural and institutional structure. This chapter, setting the stage for the study of the impact of societal contacts on gender systems, takes up these several developments: civilizations, contacts, patriarchy, and particular patriarchies and exceptions.

Human society began on the basis of small groups of people, in bands of hunters and gatherers. With this structure, people had fanned out into most habitable areas of the world by 12,000 BCE. Then, around 10,000 BCE, in the northern Middle East, agriculture was introduced, radically changing the economic framework for human life in those regions that accepted it. As agriculture spread, many societies formed more stable residential patterns, though there were important groups that continued a hunting and gathering existence or relied on the nomadic herding of animals, as in large stretches of Central Asia. Agriculture also allowed the generation of some surplus production over immediate needs. On the strength of surplus, small numbers of people could specialize in non-agricultural activities, such as craft manufacturing, religion or government. Improvements in agricultural production were gradual, but around 4000 BCE, again initially in and around the Middle East, an important series of inventions ushered in further change, of which the introduction of the wheel and the use of metals, particularly bronze, headed the list. Resulting from this in turn, around 3500 BCE, the first civilization

formed in Sumeria, in the Tigris–Euphrates valley. This was soon followed by the establishment of other river-valley civilization centers, along the Nile in Africa, the Indus in northwestern India and the Yellow River in China.

Civilizations differed from other kinds of agricultural societies in that they had formal governments, rather than less explicit and distinct leadership. They relied more on cities, though only a minority of people lived there. They encouraged higher levels of trade. Most of them, also, had writing, which facilitated bureaucratic and commercial activities.

There are two important problems in highlighting civilizations as key units in world history. The first involves recognizing that neither agriculture nor civilization captured all major groups of people, even thousands of years after the form was first established. Nomadic herding groups, in regions like Central Asia, provided a key alternative. So did groups, like many Indian tribes in North America, that combined hunting with transitory, slash-and-burn agriculture. Some of these societies avoided the kind of patriarchy that dominated civilizations. While most nomadic groups also played up the inferiority of women – for women's economic functions declined when gathering was displaced by herding – there were exceptions, with some nomadic societies avoiding full patriarchy; and many hunting groups maintained strong economic roles for women. They might emphasize sharp distinctions between men and women – for example, in assuming that men had special responsibilities for warfare or for prowess as horsemen – but they often did not set up the kind of systematic inequality characteristic of major civilizations. The existence of alternatives to full patriarchy obviously created the possibility for a host of complex encounters – when, for example, the gender assumptions of a nomadic or hunting group came into direct contact with those of a patriarchal civilization.

The second problem involves the concept of civilization itself. World historians often debate this term. Civilization as a form of human organization involving cities and organized states, among other things, is hardly superior to other societies in gender terms. Civilizations often extend and formalize inequalities; but they are different from the other forms, and they are important to study because they have embraced the largest concentrations of people since their origins. Different civilizations – Chinese, for example, or Indian – develop distinctive characteristics. This is the second use of the term. A good bit of the world history of gender involves tracing the particular values and institutions individual civilizations developed, and what happened when they encountered other civilizations. Even here there is some danger of oversimplifying or stereotyping a particular civilization, or of ignoring similarities underneath surface distinctions.

It remains true that leaders of civilizations delighted in claiming special qualities, as part of promoting unity within and separation from the outside world. Almost all civilizations thus developed a pronounced sense of how different they were from "others" – whom the Greeks would call "barbarians".

While not all civilizations expanded greatly, there was some expansionist tendency in order to add resources and relieve population pressure. With expansion came an obvious need to identify some common features – whether in language, religion or political style – that would hold the territory and its often diverse populations together. Each civilization developed something of its own flavor. Egypt emphasized a strong monarchy, pronounced concern for the afterlife and a rather cheerful, colorful art. Mesopotamia, more prone both to natural disasters and to political instability, placed less stress on a single, central government; its religion was more pessimistic, looking to punishments in the afterlife. On the other hand, Mesopotamia introduced a more extensive interest in science.

The early civilization period, in the four Afro-Eurasian centers, lasted until about 1000 BCE, by which point several had collapsed or weakened, often in the face of a new set of invasions from nomadic groups, such as the Indo-European tribes, from Central Asia. There followed a classical period in the history of civilizations. In the Mediterranean (involving North Africa, West Asia and southern Europe), in India and in China, larger civilization complexes began to emerge from 800 onward. Classical civilizations expanded their cultural, political and commercial apparatus. Internal trade increased, allowing different regions within the civilization to specialize. More ambitious governments formed empires. China promoted the most durable imperial tradition, but empires were recurrently important in India and in Greece and particularly in Rome as well. Key statements of cultural values – Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Daoism in China, civic religion but also secular philosophy in Greece and Rome – helped provide a cultural cement. These cultures offered some unity, at least in the upper classes, throughout the society: Chinese gentry could speak and write the same language and participate in a common philosophical system. The shared cultures and institutions also helped extend the sense of identity, of separateness from other societies.

As agricultural economies and then civilizations formed, cultural contacts of various sorts continued. Because the human species has so often been migratory, contacts and exchanges were virtually endemic. Through them, well before the classical period, various areas had gained access to new food stuffs, originally not natural to the region, and to new technologies – including agriculture and metalworking. Migrations and periodic nomadic invasions provided one source of contact. Trade was another. Well before the classical period, trade routes extended from China through India and Central Asia to the Middle East and the Mediterranean; collectively, these are sometimes called the Silk Road, for the principal item of exchange. At the same time, the impact of many contacts was fairly limited. Very rich people in the Mediterranean liked Chinese silk – a favorite fabric in the Roman Empire, for example – but they knew almost nothing about China, as there was no direct travel. Trade occurred in stages.

Most developments within a civilization remained internal, just as the bulk of commerce did. Constraints included not only the considerable suspicion of outsiders, but also the fact that long-distance travel was slow and risky, which limited the extent and impact of exchange. The great classical civilizations rarely had immediate contact with each other. Most were buffered by zones inhabited by nomads or less organized agricultural peoples. Contacts extended out, without usually reaching the next major civilization. Thus both the Middle East and Egypt, and then the classical Mediterranean, established links with the developing center along the upper Nile River in sub-Saharan Africa, initially called Kush. China, under the Han dynasty, had some influence in Korea and Vietnam. India, the most active trading society, exchanged with various parts of Southeast Asia including present-day Indonesia.

The most striking example of direct contact between the largest classical civilizations, prior to the final centuries of the classical era after 300 CE, involved Alexander the Great's conquests in the fourth century BCE, through the Middle East and Persia and into northwestern India. A Greek-influenced kingdom, Bactria, was established in this part of South Asia (parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) for over a century. From this unusual exchange, parts of South Asia for a time imitated Hellenistic artistic styles, with statues of Buddha draped in Mediterranean-style clothing. India also utilized some mathematical concepts developed in Greece. Further, the exchange encouraged later Indian rulers to think about sending Buddhist emissaries to the Middle East. There they won no real converts, but did possibly introduce ethical concepts that would influence philosophical systems like those of the Stoics and, through them, Christianity. This was an important result, but overall the contact, exceptional in the first place, had few durable consequences. Civilizations themselves gained greater coherence from internal exchanges – like the spread of Confucianism from north China to the south or the increasing impact of northern Indian institutions, including Hinduism and the caste system, on south India. But the most characteristic political and cultural forms of each civilization were rather separate: Confucianism was Chinese, Hinduism (except for a bit of outreach to Southeast Asia) was Indian, and so on.

While civilizations developed, amid contacts but also the limitations of exchange, gender systems – relations between men and women, assignment of roles and definitions of the attributes of each sex – had been taking shape as well. Indeed, the biggest change affecting gender – the rise of agriculture – predated civilization itself. Ultimately this evolution would intertwine with that of the civilizations.

The shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture had gradually ended a system of considerable equality between men and women. In hunting and gathering, both sexes, working separately, contributed important economic goods. Birth rates were relatively low, kept that way in part by prolonged lactation. The result facilitated women's work in gathering grains and nuts, for too-frequent childbirth and infant care would have been a burden. Women's

work in turn often contributed more caloric value to the society than hunters did – though hunters always claimed greater prestige. Settled agriculture, where it spread, changed this in favor of more pronounced male dominance. While cultural systems, including polytheistic religion, might refer to the importance of goddesses, held to be the generators of creative forces associated with fertility and therefore vital for agriculture, the new economy promoted greater gender hierarchy. Men were now usually responsible for growing grain; women's assistance was vital, but men supplied most of the food. The birth rate went up, partly because food supplies became a bit more reliable, partly because there was more use for children as laborers. This was probably the key reason why men took over most agricultural functions, as motherhood became more time-consuming. This meant that women's lives became defined more in terms of pregnancy and childcare. This was the setting for a new, pervasive patriarchalism.

In patriarchal societies, men were held to be superior creatures. They had legal rights lacking to women (though law codes protected women from some abuse, at least in principle). Thus king Hammurabi's laws in Mesopotamia, from the second millennium BCE, decreed that a woman who has "not been a careful housewife, has gadded about, has neglected her house and has belittled her husband" should be "thrown into the water". There were no equivalent provisions for men, though the code did establish that a wife could leave her husband if he did not furnish her upkeep.

Many agricultural societies prevented women from owning property independently. Many allowed men to take multiple wives (if they could provide for them). Most punished women's sexual offenses – for example, committing adultery – far more severely than they punished men's. Indeed, some historians have argued that a key motive for patriarchy rested in the felt need to make as sure as possible that a wife's children were sired by the husband. Given the importance of property in agricultural societies (in contrast to hunting and gathering), men came to feel an urge to control their heritage to later generations, and that began with regulating wives' sexuality. Other symptoms were equally important. Sons were preferred over daughters. Many families used infanticide to help control their birth rate, and infant daughters were more often put to death. Culturally, the patriarchal systems emphasized women's frailty and inferiority. They urged largely domestic duties, and sometimes restricted women's rights to appear in public. Patriarchy's reach was powerful and extensive. Many women were so intimidated and isolated by the system that protest was unlikely – though it was also true that individual women could achieve some satisfaction by manipulating husbands and sons or by lording it over inferior women in the household.

The advent of civilizations – always initially within the framework of an agricultural economy – served mainly to consolidate patriarchy, not to introduce fundamental innovations. Yet civilization did have two kinds of impact: further inequality and some interesting differentials in style and emphasis.

On the first point, within agricultural civilizations, women's inequality tended to increase over time, as the civilizations became more successful. Jewish law, arising a little later than the Hammurabic Code, was more severe in its treatment of women's sexuality or public roles. In other parts of the Middle East, a custom arose of insisting on veiling women in public, as a sign of their inferiority and the fact that they belonged to their fathers or husbands. Deterioration of women's roles in China, over time, showed in the appearance of the custom of footbinding under the Tang dynasty, after the classical period had ended; small bones in a girl's foot were broken to prevent easy walking, and the resulting shuffling gait was taken as a sign of beauty and respectable modesty. Pressures of this sort bore particularly on upper-class women, where families had enough wealth to bypass women's productive work; they tended to spread, however, and had symbolic impact even more widely. Chinese footbinding ended only in the early twentieth century.

The reasons for the trend of deterioration in established civilizations involved the growing power of male-dominated governments, which tended to reduce some of women's informal political role within families. The key factor, though, was the increase of prosperity, particularly for the upper classes, which permitted the emphasis on women's ornamental rather than practical roles.

The power of patriarchy bore most heavily on women, but obviously it affected definitions of masculinity as well. Men, whatever their private personalities, were supposed to live up to their dominant roles. They should avoid coddling women, especially in public. Often, they were supposed to be ready to assume military or other leadership duties, and of course they were in principle responsible for the economic survival of the family. In many cases, oldest sons were particularly privileged, even among males, for patriarchy could provide a pecking order based on capacities to assume full power within families. Some societies allowed certain categories of men somewhat different definitions, to indulge in more woman-like behavior or attire or to emphasize homosexual orientations. Other groups of men might be singled out: in a number of religions priests were supposed to avoid sex, while men who watched over wives and concubines in a ruler's court (and who sometimes gained considerable political power in part because they could not sire children to rival those of the king or emperor) might be castrated, as eunuchs – a backhanded testimony to the emphasis on male sexuality.

Patriarchy also shaped the development of boys, encouraging complex relationships with mothers and fathers alike. At least in the upper classes, fathers appeared as remote, authoritarian figures in their sons' lives. Emotional ties to mothers, often lifelong, could be intense.

While agriculture and then civilization progressively deepened inequalities between men and women, one final point is crucial, and it was well established during the early civilization period of world history: particular patriarchal systems varied greatly, and the systems were not universal in any event. The same emphasis on distinctive definitions of overall culture or political

institutions that civilizations forged in their gestation periods applied also to ideas about men and women and their roles.

It is not always clear why civilizations' gender systems differed – just as it is hard to explain why classical Indian society ended up emphasizing religion more than China did, or why Greece and China differed in their definitions of science. Once the differences were launched, in gender as in other matters, they tended to persist. Comparisons here are subtle: all the river-valley and classical civilizations were patriarchal, even as they enforced distinctive specific roles and cultures. The similarities and the differences could be equally important.

Among the early river-valley civilizations, neighboring Egypt and Mesopotamia clearly illustrated the potential for patriarchal emphases to differ. Whereas Mesopotamia stressed women's inferiority and subjection to male control, Egyptian civilization gave women more credit, at least in the upper classes, and experienced the rule of several powerful queens. The beautiful Nefertiti, as wife of the pharaoh Akhenaton, was influential in religious disputes during his reign. Later, Cleopatra played a powerful though ultimately abortive role as Egyptian queen, struggling to modify the controls of the Roman Empire. Women were also portrayed elaborately in Egyptian art, and provisions for their burial could be elaborate (though never rivaling those for powerful men). Both women and men could become stars on the body of the sky goddess Nut, one way in which afterlife was envisaged. There was no doubt about Egyptian patriarchy. An Egyptian writer, Ptah Hotep, made this clear in around 2000 BCE as he wrote: "If you are a man of note, found for yourself a household, and love your wife at home, as it beseems. Fill her belly, clothe her back. . . . But hold her back from getting the mastery." Still, in daily life and in social impact, the Egyptian system was distinctive.

Not all agricultural societies allowed polygamy; India differed here from China and the Middle East. Some societies traced the descent of children from the mother – this was and is true in Jewish law – rather than the father. This did not prevent inequality, but it gave motherhood more cultural and legal importance. Legal codes could vary greatly with regard to women's property rights or their ability to leave an unhappy marriage. Cultural representations varied widely. In some religions, goddesses played a vital, powerful role, while in other cultural systems male principles dominated more fully. China, with less religious emphasis, thus offered less symbolic outlet for women than did India, with its strong interest in goddess figures, or the Mediterranean, with its gender-diverse polytheism.

Variations affected men as well. Societies with strong religions, like India, might give top billing to men as priests and holy figures, in contrast to societies like the classical Mediterranean that tended to stress military and athletic qualities for ideal men. Approaches to homosexuality or bisexuality varied. In Greece and Rome, upper-class men often took boys as protégés and lovers. This was not seen as conflicting with normal family roles or with a strong emphasis on masculine prowess.

The differences possible in patriarchal systems showed clearly in the three main classical civilizations. China instituted the most thoroughgoing patriarchy, as part of the Confucian emphasis on hierarchy and order. Man in the family was in principle like the emperor in society: he ruled. Women were urged to be subservient, proficient in domestic skills. Ban Zhao was an influential woman who, despite her position or perhaps because of it, wrote a classical patriarchal manual for her sex (some time in the first century CE; it became China's most durable women's manual, republished into the nineteenth century). Her advice: "Humility means yielding and acting respectful, putting others first . . . enduring insults and bearing with mistreatment. . . . Continuing the sacrifices means serving one's husband-master with appropriate demeanor." Industrious pursuit of household duties and conceiving sons rounded out the lives of successful women, according to the Chinese system.

India's system contrasted. Women were held to be inferior; Indian thinkers debated (without agreement) whether a woman would have to be reincarnated as a man in order to advance spiritually if she had led a worthy life, or whether she could proceed directly to a higher realm. Marriages were carefully arranged by parents to assure larger family goals, often when girls and boys were quite young. Women were supposed to serve fathers and then husbands faithfully. In contrast to China, however, Indian culture paid considerable and approving attention to women's cleverness and beauty. Love and affection gained greater credit, which could link women and men informally, despite basic inequality; mothers-to-be were surrounded by solicitude. Emphasis on confining women domestically was also lower in classical India.

Classical civilization in the Mediterranean presented yet a third case. Strong emphasis on rationality in philosophy and science helped launch a tradition of distinguishing between male intellectual traits and the more emotional, inferior mental powers of women. Greek thinkers urged that women be treated well, while stressing their inferiority and their largely domestic roles. Not only public roles, but also athletics were confined to men. Raping a free woman was a crime, but carried a lesser penalty than seducing a wife – for the latter involved winning affections and loyalty away from the husband. But some women held property; their public presence was greater than in China. And conditions improved in the Hellenistic era, at least in the upper classes, as women participated in cultural pursuits and in commerce (though under male guardianship).

Furthermore, in Rome, women's conditions again improved with time – another exception to the general pattern (though there was a subsequent downturn after the first century CE, under the Empire). Early Roman society imposed harsh penalties on women, for example for sexual offenses. "The husband is the judge of the wife. If she commits a fault, he punishes her; if she has drunk wine, he condemns her; if she has been guilty of adultery, he kills her." Later Roman interest in the rule of law, however, plus a desire to encourage stable family life, brought some improvements. The powers of the husband

were curbed by the establishment of family courts, composed of members of the wife's as well as the husband's family of origin, in cases of dispute or accusation. Women freely appeared in public and attended major entertainments. While they were punished for adultery through the loss of a third of their property, these provisions were relatively mild compared with other patriarchal civilizations. Finally, Roman literature, like Greek, was filled with stories of active, whimsical goddesses as well as of gods.

In sum: variation coexisted with patriarchy, before and during the classical period, even as some important societies escaped full patriarchy altogether. Differences affected male roles and definitions as well as those for women. Trends over time differed, too.

Here was a fertile context for the complex impact of cultural contacts, when different societies gained some mutual knowledge. Precisely because patriarchy generated tensions in relationships between men and women, with men anxious to preserve dominance but sometimes uncertain about how this should play out in family settings, and with women usually avoiding protest but not necessarily being overjoyed with their lot, knowledge or assumed knowledge about how another society handled gender issues could have powerful results. It would be easy, particularly for men who were most likely to experience the results of exchanges through trade or war, to use contacts to try to confirm the correctness of their own arrangements, and thereby to exaggerate or distort gender patterns in the other society. The importance and solidity of patriarchy might suggest the need for prolonged, unusual contact in order to break through to new patterns. But contacts could unsettle; they could suggest options and alternatives. Patriarchal standards differed enough from one society to the next to make the contact potentially disruptive, and the potential expanded when confrontations between nomadic societies and established civilizations occurred.

Neither the river-valley civilization period nor the more richly evidenced classical period emphasized the importance of contact with differing standards; the focus was on building separate systems, including patriarchal systems, and integrating diverse peoples through this process. Most people were usually unaware that other societies might do things differently, but exchanges among societies, though rare, did exist, including occasional travels beyond the familiar range. Through these exchanges, in turn, we can gain a first glimpse into possible reactions: how would cultures that had struggled to define gender roles as a key component of the social order deal with occasional evidence that other arrangements were possible?

For by the end of the classical period the possibility of interchange was heating up. Troubles with the political system, particularly in Rome and China, opened new possibilities for contacts, both through outside invasions and through religious missions. Various nomadic peoples pressed into the established civilization territories – Huns from Central Asia into China and later India, Germanic tribes into southern Europe. Buddhist and Christian

missionaries were poised to seek converts outside their home base, both in other civilizations and among the less politically organized regions such as Central Asia or northern Europe. What had been a periodic experience during the early civilization and classical period, through invasions, wars and limited trade, now became commonplace, as various peoples gained some sense of other ways in which gender standards could be organized.