



Changing Gender Roles

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Gender roles have often been defined by a separation of men into public spheres, such as business and leadership, and women into private spheres, such as homemaking and motherhood. But the new ideas in the long nineteenth century—like nationalism, communism, and industrialization—challenged these roles.

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Introduction

In the long nineteenth century, ideas about gender¹ started to change. Men and women have had gendered roles in almost all societies throughout history. In the nineteenth century, European ideas about men and women's roles spread to other parts of the world through colonialism. These changes were brought by cultural exchanges. But sometimes, they were also forced on new populations. In many societies, men's roles were in the public sphere, and women participated in the private sphere of the home.

Many European societies subscribed to "Victorian" ideals of gender roles. The Victorian era was a time in British history under Queen Victoria. Women were to stay in the home. Even if they went out, they did not interact with men. Queen Victoria did not exactly fit into this traditional gender role. After all, she *ruled* all of Britain and its empire. Still, she conveyed traditional gender roles to her subjects. Through the British Empire, these ideas spread all over the world, often through force.

But in the nineteenth century, people all over the world found new ways to resist these restrictive gender roles. New ideas like socialism, nationalism and women's rights helped transform traditional attitudes and expectations. As a result, gender roles began to shift and change. The labor-intensive Industrial Revolution brought many women out of the home to work in factories. Colonized people began to resist European control. These and other changes also helped create social reforms and new ideas about childhood, voting rights, education and labor. Women wanted greater access to higher education and more freedoms. In Europe and America, such revolutionaries were called the "New Woman." It was not always a compliment. Many women of different classes united to fight for greater rights. They wanted their voices to be heard in government.

In the colonized world, gender roles were changing. People were resisting colonial powers and seeking independence. Transnational networks arose to fight for women's rights. Ideas about how to define gender, femininity and masculinity transformed everywhere.



"The New Woman"—this satirical photo represents changing gender roles in the nineteenth century. The "New Woman" dressed in man's clothing is observing her husband doing the washing, 1901. By Underwood & Underwood and courtesy of the United States Library of Congress, public domain.

Changing Gender Roles In Asia

In Asia, Confucianism was a philosophy that influenced gender roles. This was especially true in East and Southeast Asia. Women were seen as inferior to men. It didn't matter your ranking in society or job. Confucian tradition wasn't limited to East Asia and China. Its influence reached other areas through trade and migration.

¹ "Gender" and "the sexes" are not the same thing. The World Health Organization defines gender as something that "refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men." Examples would be the norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. In contrast to this is the traditional biological definition of the sexes as male and female.

For the most part, East Asian women had to live in the private sphere around the home. However, some women broke free. A handful of powerful women were in Chinese government. The Qing Dynasty's Empress Dowager Cixi was one. Other women exercised power alongside male relatives. Some women also had to work outside of the home to support their families. Wet-rice farming was a labor-heavy process. It required both men and women to plant, tend and harvest the crop. Many women also worked in the textile industry. However this was usually done in the home before industrialization. When men were called off to war, women took their places in the fields and markets. As these examples show, Confucian ideals were often very different from the daily life of many women. It was especially true in the middle to lower classes. These traditional Chinese roles began to change as European imperialists pushed their way into China.

China was transformed when European countries entered its markets. The changes affected political and intellectual life. There is a Chinese saying that goes, "Chinese learning for essence, Western learning for application." It expresses the Chinese view that European interference can be good. Outside influence could help China's military and economy. The saying also shows a commitment to keep their traditional Confucian ideals.

Other aspects of European life can be seen throughout China during the nineteenth century. Aristocratic women presented themselves differently. The painting above of Surabaya shows her dressed in European-style clothing. She is posing in the style of European portrait art of the period. It's certainly a lovely fashion statement. However, European imperialism in other parts of Asia was not as popular or kind. Many women in Southeast Asia living under imperialist control were forced to work in European plantations and factories. The work was extremely hard and the pay was very low. This work outside of the home was not a new prospect for those in the lower classes. However, the poor work conditions and unfair practices of the European imperialists did push women and men to seek out reforms and independence.



Portrait of Surabaya, an Indo-Chinese woman in 1910. By the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies and Leiden University Library, public domain.

Nationalism, Socialism and Resistance

In many areas of Africa and Latin America, traditional gender roles changed as a result of resistance to colonialism. Gender roles in Africa varied by location. But generally, men and women performed different types of jobs. In many regions of the continent, women farmed. Men tended to animals and did metalworking. In West Africa, both men and women were traders and merchants. Most often, however, these traders were men.

Western nations soon attempted to force their ideas about gender roles on their colonized subjects. But imperialist governments often misunderstood the great cultural power and importance that women had in local society. Indigenous women attempted to use their traditional roles to gain influence over European imperial governments. For example, British officials attempted to tax women's property in Nigeria. The act angered Igbo-Ibibio women there. Thousands of women marched to the capital to confront the British representatives. Historian Temma Kaplan describes the event:

"The women stole the hats [of the British men]," she said. "Then they rubbed their naked bottoms over the faces and bodies of the chiefs and their court officers. The demonstrators moved on to the towns and attacked British merchants," Kaplan wrote. The price of palm products had gone down. Meanwhile, costs of imported goods in Nigeria were rising. The women had held the merchants responsible for both. Soon, troops were ordered to attack the women. In response, "the women turned their backs and mooned² the soldiers—challenging them to 'shoot your mothers.' The soldiers shot down 18 women." The uprising showed the British that many people were against their empire. Those feelings would only grow, Kaplan noted (Kaplan 178).



Igbo women in the early twentieth century, unknown author. Image courtesy of Margery Perham, Native Administration in Nigeria, London, 1937, UNESCO. Public domain.

In Africa, Asia and Latin America, women began to take on political roles. They organized labor unions and political groups that fought for independence from Western powers. Men's roles also changed. For no matter your gender, the white ruling class treated all indigenous people as lesser. European powers in Latin America forced Western beliefs and gender roles on the native population. The Catholic church's patriarchal values stripped Native American women of their power. However, independence movements erupted across Latin America. Women and men challenged these values.

These independence movements often followed Karl Marx and his views about workers' rights. For example, Marxism said all people were equal regardless of class or gender. There were assigned roles for men and women. But technically, Marxism said men and women could become leaders. For many revolutionary women and men, there was a struggle between the more traditional views of gender separating the public (male) and private (female) spheres. Independence, therefore, was seen as being gained through a class struggle. Imperial powers had to be overthrown. More women were entering the labor force. Workers were uniting to fight for independence. As a result, industrialization and independence movements helped change typical ideas of gender.

² When you "moon" someone, you show them your bare bottom. Aren't you glad you read footnotes now?

Nationalism also contributed in these efforts. New ideas emerged about the connectedness of the nation and the creation of shared stories or myths. These helped to unify people living as members of one nation. Differences in gender or ethnicity weren't supposed to be highlighted. Still, both men's and women's roles in the nation were well defined. Women were praised as patriots for being mothers and keeping home life stable. Meanwhile, men went out to participate in the actual governing of the nation.

Conclusion

Many new nations were formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The images used in the formation of a new nation were also steeped in gender. Some of the new nations were characterized as feminine or womanly. Nations' armies fought to secure their countries; they were seen as masculine. For example, images of "Lady Liberty" and "Republican Motherhood" were used in both in the American and French revolutions. Liberty was symbolized by a woman. She led the people into battle. But in terms of appropriate gender roles for women, images of motherhood and protectors of the family from within the home were used most often. In contrast, men were viewed as the revolutionary fighters. They were praised for their strength and vigor. Men were seen as protectors of the family and nation from outside the home. As new nations emerged in Germany, Italy and Japan, their leaders spoke of a "Fatherland." Women often played a role in national unification. But in these new "masculine" states, men were supposed to set examples of manly strength. Women were once again pushed to the side of public life.

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